

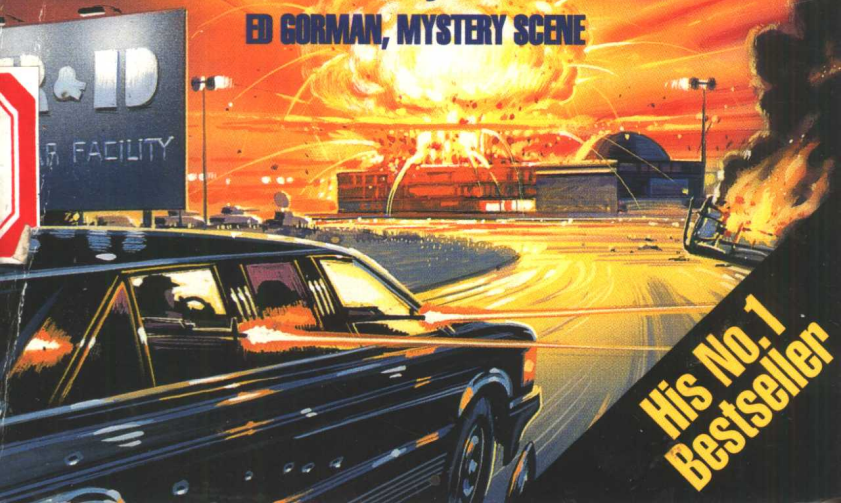
DAVID HAGBERG

author of *Crossfire*, *Critical Mass*,
Countdown and *Winner Take All*

DESERT FIRE

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DAVID HAGBERG

**DESERT
FIRE**



Pan Macmillan Australia

Published 1993 in United States of America by Tor Books
This Pan edition published 1996 by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Limited
St Martins Tower, 31 Market Street, Sydney

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National Library of Australia
cataloguing-in-publication data:

Hagberg, David.
Desert fire.
ISBN 0.330 35730 1
I Title.
A813.54

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

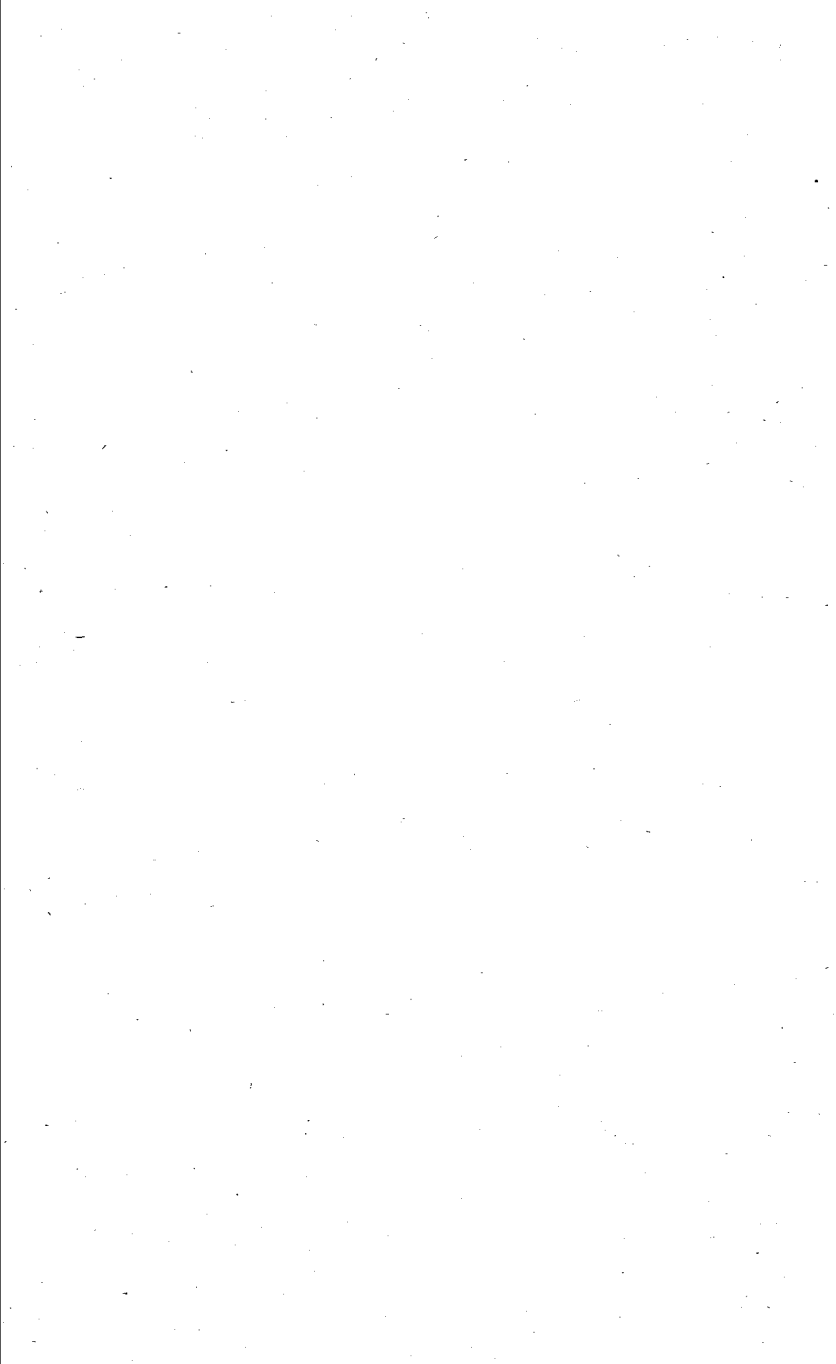
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

David Hagberg, a military intelligence analyst during the Vietnam War, is a popular speaker at CIA and NSA functions. He has published over a dozen novels of suspense with over four million copies in print. He has travelled extensively in Europe, Asia and South America and resides in Duluth, Minnesota.

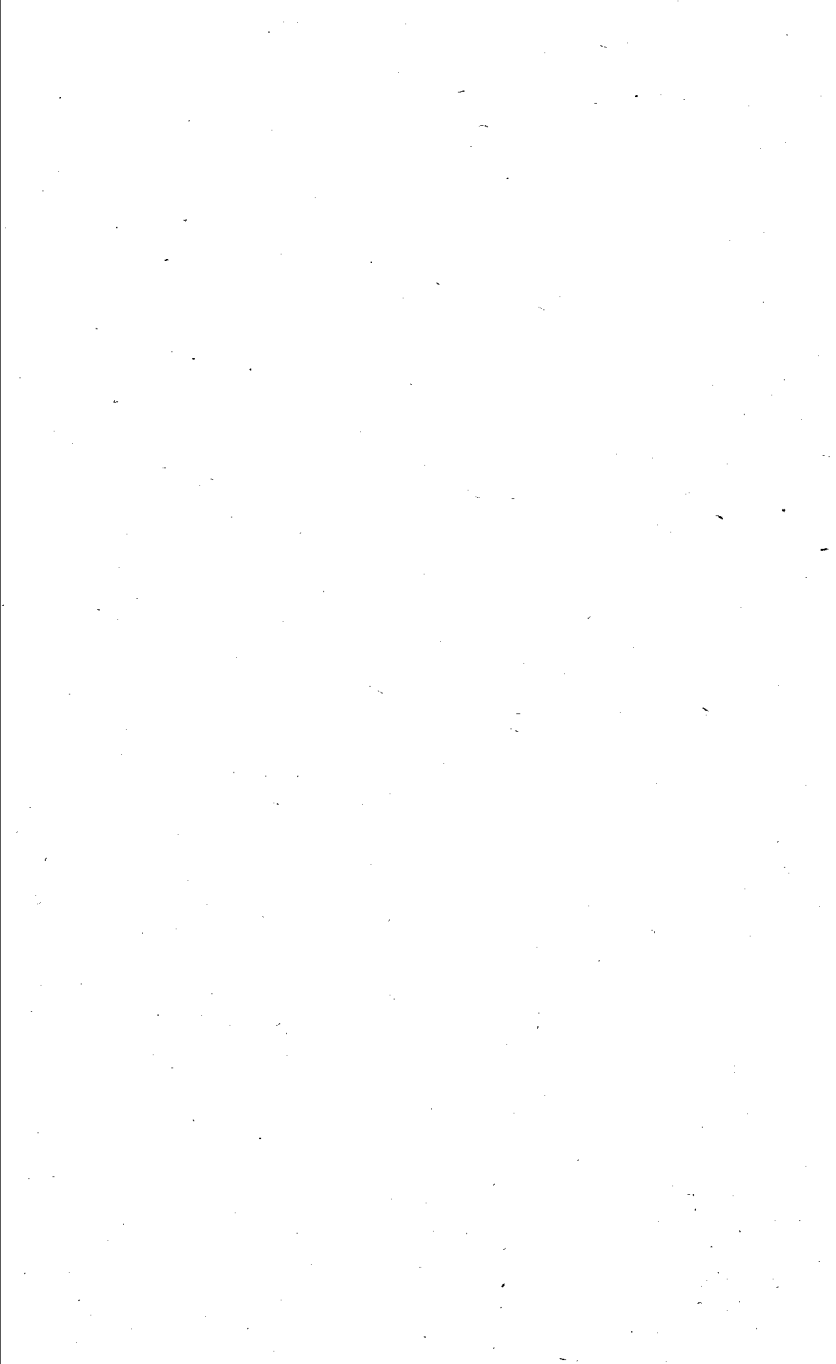
Also by David Hagberg in Pan

**COUNTDOWN
CROSSFIRE
CRITICAL MASS
WINNER TAKES ALL**

FOR LAURIE







SADDAM HUSSEIN al-Tikriti stood at the open flap of his desert tent some miles west of Baghdad, the skirts of his flowing galabia ruffling in the cool evening breeze. He was alone for the moment, which he seldom was, and it gave him a curiously disquieting feeling. As if he were the very last man on earth. Cities were empty. No one worked the land. No one lived across the sea. Emptiness.

Far to the southeast he picked out a slow-moving pinprick of light against the brilliant backdrop of the stars. His advisers told him that it was the CIA's latest spy satellite, the KH-15, sent up on the tail of an infidel rocket to watch them.

He edged a little deeper into the darkness of the tent. This night he felt as old as the desert hills and wadis around him, almost one with the spirits of the ten thousand years of history here. This was the Fertile Crescent. The valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The birthplace of a dozen religions, of civilization itself.

Like Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi, Hussein had begun coming to the desert to find solace among his ancestors after his defeat over the reclamation of Iraqi homelands in Kuwait. The Revolutionary Command Council was still his to control, and therefore the nation was his. Western

forces had, for the most part, finally withdrawn from the region. And once again his oil was flowing, bringing his people the much-needed revenue so long denied them by the infidels.

And yet it wasn't enough. A people could either grow and prosper, or wither and die. Iran to the east and Israel to the west would have to be defeated. Decisively. But the Gulf War, as the Western media called the battle, had taught him an important lesson. One of patience. One of cat and mouse.

"General," the voice of one of his bodyguards called from the darkness.

Hussein's hand went to the pistol in the pocket of his felt jacket. "Ay-wa," Yes, he said, softly.

"He is here." The guard was visible now just beyond the ten-meter proximity detectors. A dark figure stood behind him.

The man was an old friend and comrade in the *jihad* against the West. Munich, Hama, Beirut. A dozen places, a hundred times, he'd proved himself. And yet there was something different about him in the past months since he'd gone to Germany. Hussein had seen it in the man's eyes, and he wanted to see if there'd been any change.

He reached to a panel on his left and flipped a switch that would interrupt the elaborate protective alarm system for ten seconds.

"Come," he said, and his grip tightened on the pistol. So much was at stake, and they were so close this time, that he could not afford to take any chances. This time there would be no Desert Storm.

The dark figure came forward, his hands spread outward in a gesture of humility and peace. Seconds later the alarm circuits tripped back on with an audible snap.

"I serve at your command," the man known to the world only as Michael said graciously.

He was taller than Hussein and just as thickly built. His features, which, unlike Carlos's, were in no police or intelligence file anywhere in the world, were dark and handsome, his hair only slightly gray.

They embraced; left cheek, right cheek, and left again, then separated. Hussein managed a slight smile. All was right with Michael. Some tension, perhaps, but nothing was amiss.

"How was your trip?" the Iraqi leader asked, taking Michael's arm and leading him into the more secure rear room of the tent.

"Tedious, in part because of the security precautions I had to observe. But it is good to be among friends. Believe me."

"You are not tiring yourself out? The strain is not too much?"

Michael shook his head in sadness. "Germany has deteriorated since the reunification. Nothing is the same. Nothing will remain the same. They watch us continuously."

"It is why we must be victorious," Hussein said.

"Yes, my general. There is no God but God."

Hussein thought of Michael as his soldier of Allah. The righteous fist of God will come down and smite mine enemies dead. It was written.

"Now, come and tell me what progress you are making," Hussein said, motioning Michael to take a place among the cushions at a low table laden with food and drink. Of all the men and women he'd sent to Germany on the project, Michael was the best. Michael would be the tool of Iraq's salvation.

2

BONN LAY under a thick fall overcast that covered the night sky. Streets glistened from the rains, shops were closed, traffic was heavy and angry. The Rhine flowed impassively, darkly, through the city.

Occasionally, a mournful barge whistle rose above the clamor along the Hauptstrasse or beneath the Konrad Adenauer Bridge, but there had been no pleasure boats on the river all day, and certainly none this night. If a city could be said to be holding its breath, waiting for something to happen, then Bonn was doing it now.

The killer felt it too. But he had the patience of a desert Bedouin, willing to wait, to watch, to stalk his prey. His time would come, as it had before and before that. He was one of the *fedayeen* . . . of the ones willing to sacrifice themselves.

"*Insha' Allah*," Praise God, he muttered.

He waited in his dark gray Mercedes away from the violet sodium-vapor lights on tall aluminum stanchions in the west parking lot of Kraftwerk Union's Research Facility Nord. The early shift had left hours ago and now only a few engineers and midlevel managers trickled out of the courtyard gates to their cars in the rain. They hurried, heads bent low, faces hidden beneath umbrellas,

coat collars hunched up. No one noticed him in the darkness.

He'd been watching the girl for weeks now, ever since he'd spotted her downtown. She was just like the others. Chance encounters at a time when he felt as if he were going to explode with rage.

He'd known immediately that she would be the one, so he had followed her to her apartment. He'd watched as she parked her yellow Opel on the narrow street, its wheels properly up on the curb. He'd watched as she let herself in, and a half-minute later as the third-floor windows suddenly showed light.

Understanding full well what he was risking, he'd remained parked in front of her apartment building until well after midnight, when the lights in her window went out. Still he remained. If a passing police unit had spotted him, there would have been questions impossible to answer. But the blood lust was on him.

Hours later, perhaps around three, he'd seen the glowing tip of a cigarette at her window.

"Can't sleep, little girl?" he whispered to himself. "The demons are getting you. Satan is near. Night sweats? Legs cramping up? Breath coming short? Heart pounding in your chest?" He knew all those feelings. And there was only one cure for them, and that was death.

Now, at the research facility, a man and a woman passed the lighted security booth, pausing under the canopy that extended over the driveway, and then the man scampered across to the parking lot, leaving the woman behind.

The killer studied her, how she held herself, how she waited. Though she too was obviously an infidel, she was the wrong type. She was tall, and even beneath her raincoat he could see that her figure was slight. Not

suitable at all, though her kind would be much easier to kill. He could snap her neck with little effort. There'd be no fight. The thought gave him no pleasure.

A car came up one of the rows and pulled beneath the canopy. The woman got in and they left. The killer watched in his rearview mirror as the taillights disappeared down the ramp that led to the Autobahn. Once more the parking lot was still.

He got out of his car and hurried past four rows of cars to where the girl's yellow Opel was parked. The driver's side door was unlocked, as he knew it would be. He opened it, and from inside released the hood latch. Around front, he lifted the hood.

Working in the dim light from a distant stanchion, he pulled the wire out of the ignition coil, then replaced the rubber tip a scant half-inch back down into the connector so that though the coil was now unplugged, it looked to be properly connected.

He closed the hood and walked back to his own car, the entire operation taking him barely forty-five seconds.

He was shaking when he got behind the wheel, and he had to force himself to calm down, to take deep breaths. It wasn't fear, it was excitement tinged with rage. The whore. The infidel. Satan's imp. He shuddered as he started his car and headed out of the parking lot back toward the city.

Control, that was everything. It was the lesson they'd learned at the Munich Olympics, at Hama, at Yemen, at Lockerbie, at a hundred places in the past twenty-five years. Even in insanity, control was important if he was to survive to continue doing Allah's work.

The killer knew he was insane. He'd known that for a number of years. And he understood his condition with a cold, clinical certainty. Cure was impossible. Survival

meant maintaining control until his personal demons became so overwhelming in the night that he had to strike.

He took care with his driving, going with the traffic along the Köln-Bonn Autobahn, past the airport south-east of the plant, into the city. At times the urgent desire to hurry came over him, but he resisted. There was time. Plenty of time, he told himself.

Crossing the river at midtown on the Konrad Adenauer Bridge, he took the busy Friedrich-Ebert Allee into Bad Godesberg, arriving fifteen minutes later on the narrow street where last night again he had parked until nearly dawn. This time he stopped in the middle of the next block, shut off the car and sat back in his seat, adjusting the rearview mirror so that he could see her apartment building.

Time now, he thought, to wait. But not long. Not much longer, *Insha' Allah*.

He began to chant softly the Shahada. "*Allah-u Akbar; Allah-u Akbar; La illah illa Allah . . .*" God is most Great; God is most Great; I testify that there is no other God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet; God is most Great; God is Most Great . . .