



The Cobra

By Frederick Forsyth

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Frederick Forsyth on *The Cobra*



“There are two ways of doing this job,” a news agency bureau chief told me once. “You can not bother and get it wrong, or take the trouble and get it right. In my office, we get it right.”

He was a good journalist and taught me a lot. Even when I switched from foreign correspondent to novelist, the training stuck. Even though it is fiction, I try to get it right.

Anyway, readers nowadays have been around, seen a lot, traveled a lot. And there is the Internet. If they want to check you out, they can. So if it is uncheckable, you can make it up, but if it can be checked, it had better be right. That is why I go all over, looking, probing, inquiring, conversing in low places, until I am damn certain that even the smallest detail really is the way it is.

That includes the weird places to be visited. For *The Cobra*, a deep delve into the murky world of cocaine, smugglers, Coast Guards, cops, and gangsters, there were certain “must-go” targets. The HQ of the DEA in Washington, the backstreets of Bogotá, the dockside dives of Cartagena. But the more I researched, the more I came across a recurring name: Guinea-Bissau.

Once a Portuguese West African colony, G-B went through eighteen years of independence war and about the same of civil war. The two left it a shattered, burned-out hellhole. The ultimate failed state. It still is. And the cocaine cartels spotted a perfect shipment point for coke going from South America to Europe. They moved in, put almost every major official and politico on the payroll, and began to shift scores of tons of puro through from Colombia to Europe. This I had to see, so I went, posing as a bird-watcher (the swamps and marshes are a wintering ground for European wading birds).

It was not my fault I landed in the middle of yet another coup d’état. It started while I was airborne from Lisbon to Bissau city. When I arrived, my contact was in a hell of a state. Flashing his diplomatic pass, he

whisked us both through the formalities. It was two a.m.: sweaty hot.

“What’s the hurry?” I asked, as he raced his SUV down the pitted track to the city. “Look behind you,” he said.

The horizon in the rearview mirror was aglow with headlights. A vengeful Army was also heading for the city. At eight-thirty the previous evening, someone had put a bucket of Semtex under the Army chief of staff. He was all over the ceiling. The Army reckoned it was the President—different tribes and eternal enemies. They were coming to settle accounts.

I was in my hotel by three a.m. but unable to sleep, so I put on the light. It was the only modern hotel and had a generator. There is no public lighting in Bissau. At four-thirty, trying to read, I heard the boom, about five hundred yards down the street. Not thunder, not a head-on crash. Ammo, big ammo. One remembers the sound. Actually, it was the Army putting an RPG through the President’s bedroom window.

It seems the explosion did not kill the old boy, even at seventy-one. He crawled out of bed. Then the building collapsed on him. Still alive, he crawled from the rubble to the lawn, where the soldiers were waiting. They shot him three times in the chest. When he still wouldn’t die, they realized he had a juju that made him immune to bullets.

But that juju cannot prevail against machetes. Everyone knows that. So they chopped him up. He died.

The next day was kind of quiet, apart from the patrolling Army jeeps bristling with the usual Kalashnikovs, looking for the murderers of their boss. My contact waved his diplomatic pass; I beamed and distributed signed photos of a smiling Queen Elizabeth, with assurances that she wished them well (the Third World reveres the queen, even with a facsimile signature). We were waved through.

The airport was closed; ditto the borders. I was trapped inside, but no one could get in either. In the trade, it’s called an exclusive. So I borrowed my host’s mobile and filed a thousand-word summing-up to London’s Daily Express, for whom I do a weekly column. I had the Express call me back and dictated the story to a lady with earphones in London. No one has filed news like that since Dan Rather was in college. Old-fashioned, but secure from intercept, I thought.

But of course the NSA at Fort Meade, Maryland, heard it all and told the CIA. In the matter of coups in West Africa, I have what London’s Cockneys call “a bit of previous.” I wrote The Dogs of War long ago about that very subject.

After the story, half the West’s media was trying to get me, but I was out in the creeks checking out the sumptuous mansion of the Colombians, notable for their ponytails, chains of gold bling, and black-windowed SUVs. When I got back to Bissau, a very voluble wife, Sandy, was on the phone.

It seems she was fixing a lunch date with a girlfriend and explained in her e-mail: “I’m free for lunch ’cos Freddie is away in Guinea-Bissau.” Mistake. The e-mail vanished off the screen unfinished. Her mailbox vaporized. Database wiped. Instructions appeared on her screen: “Do not open this file. Cease all sending or we will respond.”

I had a zany mental image of the morning conference at Langley. Corner suite, seventh floor, Old Building.

“What’s this going on in Africa, Chuck?”

“A coup in Guinea-Bissau, Director. Several assassinations. It could be that damn limey again.”

“Can we take him out of there?”

“It seems not. He is somewhere in the jungle.”

“Well, zap his wife’s lunch dates. That’ll teach him.”

The same night, I dined with new friends, and my neighbor at the table was an elderly Dutchman. “You work here?” I asked.

“Ja. Three-year secondment. I am a forensic pathologist. I run the mortuary.”

The only things that work in Bissau are the gift-aid projects donated by the developed world. The Dutch built the modern mortuary. Shrewdly, they put it next to the locally run general hospital. Smart, because no one leaves the hospital save feetfirst on a gurney heading for the morgue.

“Been busy?” I asked. He nodded solemnly.

“Ja, very busy all day. Stitching the President back together.”

It seemed the government wanted the old boy in his coffin more or less in the right order. I tucked into my stewed goat.

It took three days for things to calm down and the airport to reopen. I was on the next flight to Lisbon and London. At Heathrow, a passport officer checked the stamps, raised an eyebrow, and passed the document to a colleague. He contemplated both the passport and its owner for a while, then gave it back.

“How was Guinea-Bissau, Mr. Forsyth?” he asked mildly.

“Cancel the vacation,” I advised. “You won’t like it.” Both smiled thinly. Officials don’t do that. Never jest with officialdom. I stepped out into the crisp morning air of March 1, 2009. Beautifully cool. Good to be home.

Of course, West Africa got its own back. It always does. Twenty days later, my left leg blew up like a vegetable marrow, a real prizewinner. Dark red and hurting like hell. The first medic thought deep vein thrombosis. Bull feathers. Even I know DVT cuts in much sooner after the jet flight and there is no swelling.

The second surgeon did an ultrasound scan and got it in one. A sting, a bite, a scratch, who knows? But leading to a pretty vicious staphylococcal infection, aka septicemia or blood poisoning.

So into ER went the old scribe, and then to ICU. They pumped enough amoxicillin into a catheter to sink the USS Saratoga and saved the leg, though they were close to scrubbing up to take it off.

I came out after three weeks and spent the rest of the summer finishing the research among our Special Forces. Then wrote the novel October through December. Now it is with the publisher, due out mid-August.

So if you are interested, dear reader, it’s all in *The Cobra*. The dives of Cartagena, the U.S. Navy SEALs, their British equivalents the SBS, the Global Predator UAVs, oh, and dear old Guinea-Bissau. And it’s all true. Well, okay, it’s not all true, it’s a novel. But it’s accurate.

--Frederick Forsyth

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