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The Cobra

Written by Frederick Forsyth

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The Cobra

FREDERICK FORSYTH



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For Justin and all the young agents, British and American, who, at great risk, are deep undercover in the struggle against narcotic drugs.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFB	Air Force Base (USA)
BAMS	Broad Area Maritime Surveillance
BKA	German Federal Criminal Police Agency
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRRC	Combat Rubber Raiding Craft (USA)
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
FARC	Colombian Revolutionary/Marxist Organization
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FLO	Forces of Law and Order
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement (USA)
MAOC-N	Maritime Analysis Operations Centre for Narcotics
MI5	Security Service (UK)
NSA	National Security Agency (USA)
PEO	Presidential Executive Order
RATO	Rocket-Assisted Take-Off
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary

RHIB	Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (USA)
RIB	Rigid-hull Inflatable Boat (UK)
SAS	Special Air Service Regiment
SBS	Special Boat Service
SEALs	US Navy Special Forces
SOCA	Serious and Organised Crime Agency
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UDYCO	Anti-Drug Unit, Madrid
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
ZKA	German Federal Customs Police Agency

PART ONE

Coil

CHAPTER ONE

THE TEENAGE BOY WAS DYING ALONE. NO ONE KNEW AND ONLY one would have cared. He lay, skeletal from a life ruined by drugs, on a stinking palliasse in the corner of a filthy room in an abandoned block. The slum was in one of the failed housing schemes called 'a project' in Anacostia, a part of Washington D.C. of which the city is not proud and which tourists never visit.

If the boy had known his death was going to start a war he would neither have understood nor cared. That is what drug abuse does to a young mind. It destroys it.

The late-summer dinner at the White House was small by the standards of presidential hospitality. Just twenty diners in the form of ten couples sat down after drinks in an antechamber and eighteen were most impressed to be there.

Nine of these were major volunteers working for the Veterans' Administration, that nationwide body that

concerns itself with the welfare of those who have worn the uniform of any of the Armed Forces.

The nine years to 2010 had produced a huge number of men and some women returning from Iraq or Afghanistan injured or traumatized. As Commander-in-Chief, the President was offering his thanks for what his nine guests from the VA had been able to do. So they and their spouses were invited to dine where the legendary Abraham Lincoln once ate. They had had the private tour of the apartments, guided by the First Lady herself, and were seated beneath the attentive gaze of the major-domo to await the pouring of the soup. So it was slightly embarrassing when the elderly waitress began to cry.

She made no sound but the tureen in her hands began to tremble. The table was circular and the First Lady was on the far side. She glanced up from the guest being served and saw the tears running quietly down the cheeks of the waitress.

The major-domo, who missed nothing that could disoblige his President, followed her gaze and began to move silently but fast around the table. He nodded urgently to a nearby waiter to take the tureen before there was a disaster and eased the elderly woman away from the table towards the swing door to the pantry and kitchen. As the pair disappeared from view the First Lady dabbed her mouth, murmured an apology to the retired general on her left, rose and followed.

In the pantry the waitress was by now sitting, her shoulders shaking, murmuring, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' The expression on the face of the major-domo indicated he

was not in a forgiving mood. One does not break down in front of the Chief Executive.

The First Lady gestured to him that he should return to the soup serving. Then she stooped over the weeping woman who was dabbing her eyes on the edge of her pinny and still apologizing.

In response to a couple of gentle questions, waitress Maybelle explained her extraordinary lapse. The police had found the body of her only grandson, the boy she had raised since his father died among the rubble of the Trade Center nine years earlier when the child was six.

They had explained to her the cause of death as declared by the medical examiner and informed her that the cadaver was in the city morgue awaiting collection.

And so in the corner of a pantry the First Lady of the USA and an elderly waitress, both descended from slaves, comforted each other while a few feet away the leading lights of the VA exchanged stilted conversation over soup and croutons.

Nothing more was said through the meal and it was only when the President was removing his tuxedo in the private apartment two hours later that he asked the obvious question.

Five hours after that, in the near darkness of the bedroom, with only a sliver of light from the permanent glare over the city of Washington seeping through the bullet-proof glass and past the curtain, the First Lady became aware that the man beside her was not asleep.

The President had been in large part raised by his grandmother. The relationship between a boy and his grandma was both known to him and deeply important.

So although it was his habit to rise early and put himself through rigorous callisthenics to stay in shape, he could not sleep. He lay in the darkness and thought.

He had already decided the fifteen-year-old, whoever he was, would not go to a pauper's grave but to a decent burial in a proper churchyard. But he was intrigued by the cause of death in one so young and hailing from a poor but devotedly respectable household.

Just after three he swung his long, thin legs out of bed and reached for a robe. There was a sleepy, 'Where are you going?' from beside him. 'I won't be long,' he replied, knotted the belt and padded through to the dressing room.

When he lifted the handset the reply took two seconds. If the duty operator was tired at that hour of the night when the human spirit is at its lowest she did not show it. Her enquiry was bright and eager.

'Yes, Mr President.'

The light on her console told her exactly who was calling. Even after two years in that remarkable building the man from Chicago still had to remind himself that he could have anything he liked any time of the day or night simply by asking for it.

'Would you raise the Director of the DEA, in his home or wherever he is?' he asked. There was no surprise from the operator. When you are That Man, if you want to exchange pleasantries with the president of Mongolia, it will be arranged.

'I'll have him momentarily,' said the young woman far below in the Comms room. She tapped fast at a computer keyboard. Minuscule circuits did their job and a name

flashed up. A query as to private phone number produced ten digits on the screen. They referred to a handsome townhouse out in Georgetown. She made the connection and waited. At the tenth ring a bleary voice answered.

'I have the President for you, sir,' she told him. The middle-aged public servant became unbleary very quickly. Then the operator transferred the boss of the federal agency known formally as the Drug Enforcement Administration on the line to the room upstairs. She did not listen in. A light would tell her when the men were done and she could disconnect.

'Sorry to trouble you at this hour,' said the President. He was at once assured it was no trouble at all. 'I need some information, maybe advice. Could you meet with me this morning, nine o'clock at the West Wing?'

Only courtesy made it into a question. Presidents issue instructions. He was assured the Director of the DEA would be in the Oval Office at nine a.m. The President hung up and went back to bed. At last he slept.

In an elegant redbrick house in Georgetown the lights were on in the bedroom as the Director asked an uncomprehending lady in curlers what the hell was that about? Senior civil servants roused by their supreme authority at three a.m. and in person have no choice but to think something has gone wrong. Perhaps badly so. The Director did not return to sleep but went down to the kitchen to fix juice and coffee and do some serious worrying.

Across the Atlantic it was dawn. On a bleak, grey and rain-slashed sea off the north German port of Cuxhaven,

the MV *San Cristobal* took on her pilot. The skipper, Captain José-Maria Vargas, had the helm and the pilot beside him gave murmured instructions. They spoke in English, the common language of the air and the sea. The *San Cristobal* turned her nose and entered the outer roads of the estuary of the Elbe. Sixty miles later she would be guided into Hamburg, Europe's biggest river port.

At 30,000 tons the *San Cristobal* was a general freighter flying the flag of Panama. Forward of the bridge as the two men stared into the murk to pick up the buoys marking the deep channel were row upon row of steel sea-containers.

There were eight levels of them below decks and four above. Lengthwise there were fourteen lines from the prow to the bridge and the vessel was wide enough to take eight from side to side.

Her papers would say, quite rightly, that she had begun her voyage in Maracaibo, Venezuela; then proceeded east to complete her cargo with a further eighty containers of bananas at Paramaribo, capital and sole port of Surinam. What the papers would not say was that one of those last sea-containers was very special because it contained bananas and one other consignment.

The second cargo had flown in a tired old Transall cargo plane, bought very second-hand from South Africa, out of a remote hacienda in upstate Colombia, over Venezuela and Guyana to land at an equally remote banana plantation in Surinam.

What the old cargo plane had brought had then been stacked, brick by brick, at the far back end of a steel sea-container. The bricks were jammed from side wall to side

wall and from floor to roof. When they were seven layers deep a false rear wall had been welded into place, then sanded and painted, along with the whole of the rest of the interior. Only then were the hard, green unripe bananas hung on their racks to remain, chilled but not frozen, all the way to Europe.

Flatbed trucks had growled and snorted through the jungle to bring the export order to the coast and there the *San Cristobal* had taken them aboard to become her deck cargo and complete her capacity. Then she cast off and headed for Europe.

Captain Vargas, a scrupulously honest mariner who did not know about the extra cargo he carried, had been to Hamburg before and never ceased to marvel at its size and efficiency. The old Hanseatic port is like not one but two cities. There is the city where people live around the outer and inner Alster waterways and there is the sprawling port city, home of the continent's biggest sea-container facility.

With 13,000 port calls a year, 140 million tons of freight moves in and out, docking at any of the 320 berths. The container port alone has four terminals and the *San Cristobal* was allocated to Altenwerder.

As the freighter eased herself at five knots past Harburg, coming awake on the western bank, the two men at the helm were served strong Colombian coffee and the German sniffed the aroma with appreciation. The rain had ceased, the sun was struggling through and the crew were looking forward to their shore time.

It was close to midday when the *San Cristobal* slid into her allotted berth and almost at once one of the Altenwerder's

fifteen gantries moved into position and began to heft the containers off the freighter and onto the quay.

Captain Vargas had said goodbye to the pilot, who, shift over, had departed for his home in Altona. With engines closed down and standby power running the needed facilities, with the crew, passports in hand, going ashore for the bars of the Reeperbahn, the *San Cristobal* seemed at peace, the way Captain Vargas, whose career and home she was, liked her.

He could not know that four containers up from his bridge, two layers down and three rows from the starboard side there was a container with a small and unusual logo on its side. One would have to look hard to find it, for sea-containers have all sorts of scratches, daubs, identity codes and owners' names painted on them. This particular logo was in the form of two concentric circles, one inside the other, and in the smaller one a Maltese cross. It was the secret identity code of the Hermandad, or Brotherhood, the gang behind ninety percent of Colombian cocaine. And down on the quay there was just one pair of eyes that would recognize that sign.

The gantry was lifting the containers from the deck to a moving army of computer-driven wheeled drones called automatic guided vehicles or AGVs. These, controlled from a tower high above the quay, removed the steel crates from quay to storage area. That was when an official moving unnoticed between the AGVs saw the design with the two circles. He used his cellphone to make one call, then hurried back to his office. Miles away a flatbed truck began to roll towards Hamburg.

At that hour the Director of the DEA was shown into

the Oval Office. He had been there before several times but the huge antique working desk, the draped flags and the seal of the republic still impressed him. He appreciated power, and this place was pure power.

The President was in affable mood, exercised, showered, breakfasted and casually dressed. He bade his visitor sit on one of the sofas and joined him on the other.

'Cocaine,' he said. 'I want to know about cocaine. You have a huge amount of material about it.'

'A shedload, Mr President. Files several feet thick if you put them in a column.'

'Too much,' said the President. 'I need about ten thousand words. Not page after page of stats. Just the facts. A synthesis. Just what it is, where it comes from (as if I didn't know), who makes it, who ships it, who buys it, who uses it, what it costs, where the profits go, who benefits, who loses, what we are doing about it.'

'Just cocaine, Mr President? Not the others? Heroin, PCP, angel dust, methamphetamine, the ubiquitous cannabis?'

'Just cocaine. Just for me. Eyes only. I need to know the basic facts.'

'I will order up a new report, sir. Ten thousand words. Plain language. Top secret. Six days, Mr President?'

The Commander-in-Chief rose, smiling, hand outstretched. The meeting was over. The door was already open.

'I knew I could count on you, Director. Three days.'

The Director's Crown Victoria was waiting in the car park. On command the driver brought it, swerving, to the door of the West Wing. In forty minutes the Director was

back across the Potomac in Arlington, ensconced in his top-floor suite at 700 Army Navy Drive.

He gave the job to his Head of Operations, Bob Berrigan. The younger man, who had made his bones out in the field rather than behind a desk, nodded glumly and muttered, 'Three days?'

The Director nodded. 'Don't eat, don't sleep. Live on coffee. And, Bob, don't stint. Make it as bad as it is. There may be a budget hike in here down the line.'

The ex-field operative headed down the corridor to tell his PA to cancel all meetings, interviews and engagements for three days. Desk jockeys, he thought. Delegate, ask the impossible, go out for dinner and look for the money.

By sundown the *San Cristobal*'s cargo was onshore, but it was still inside the port perimeter. Flatbed trucks were choking the three bridges they had to cross to pick up their imports. Stuck in a tailback along the Niederfelde Brücke was one from Darmstadt with a swarthy man at the wheel. His papers would show he was a German citizen of Turkish extraction, a member of one of Germany's largest minorities. They would not reveal that he was a member of the Turkish mafia.

Inside the perimeter there would be no tailback. Customs clearance for a certain steel container from Surinam would be problem-free.

So vast is the quantity of freight entering Europe via Hamburg that a rigorous examination of every container is quite simply impossible. German customs, the ZKA, does what it can. Around five percent of incoming cargoes

secure close examination. Some of these are random, but most derive from a tip-off, something odd about the description of the cargo and its port of departure (bananas do not come from Mauritania) or just inadequate paperwork.

The checks may involve opening the sea-container by breaking the seals, measuring containers for secret compartments, chemical tests in the on-site laboratory, the use of sniffer dogs or just X-ray inspection of the collector truck. Around two hundred and forty trucks in a single day are X-rayed. But one banana container would have no such problems.

This container had not been taken to the HHLA Fruit and Cool Centre because it was tagged to depart the docks too quickly to make that worthwhile. Clearance at Hamburg is achieved largely by the IT-based ATLAS system. Someone had entered the twenty-one-digit registration number of the consignment into the ZKA computer and cleared it for release before the *San Cristobal* had come round the last curve in the river Elbe.

When the Turkish driver had finally inched his way to the head of the queue by the dock gate, his steel container was cleared for collection. He presented his papers, the ZKA man in his booth by the gate tapped them into his computer, noted the clearance for a small import of bananas for a modest little fruit company in Darmstadt and nodded the go-ahead. In thirty minutes the Turkish driver was back over the bridge gaining access to the sprawling network of Germany's autobahns.

Behind him rode one metric tonne of pure Colombian cocaine. Before sale to the final inhalers it would be 'cut'

or 'bashed' to six or seven times its original volume with the addition of other chemicals like benzocaine, creatine, ephedrine or even the horse tranquillizer ketamine. These simply convince the user he is getting a bigger thrill than could be acquired from the amount of cocaine actually going up the nose. Further bulk can be achieved with simple but harmless white powders like baking soda and icing sugar.

With every kilo of a thousand grams converted into seven thousand and the 'punters' paying up to $10 US per gram, each kilo of pure would finally sell out at $70,000. The driver had a thousand such kilos behind him, a street value of seventy million dollars. Based on the 'pasta' bought from the Colombian jungle peasants for $1,000 a kilo, there was enough to cover the cargo plane to Surinam, a fee for the banana plantation, the tiny freight charge on the *San Cristobal* and $50,000 slipped into the Grand Cayman account of the corrupt official in Hamburg.

The European gangsters would bear the cost of blenderizing the hard bricks into talc-like fine powder, cutting to multiply the bulk and merchandising to the users. But if the overheads from jungle to Hamburg dock gate were five percent and the European overheads another five, there was still ninety percent profit to split between the cartel and the mafias and gangs across Europe and the USA.

The American President would learn all this from the Berrigan Report which hit his desk three days later, as promised.

While he read the report after dinner, another two tons

of Colombian pure in a pick-up truck sneaked across the Texan border near a small town called Nuevo Laredo and vanished into the American heartland.

Dear Mr President,
I have the honor to present the report on narcotic cocaine as requested by you.

ORIGINS: Cocaine derives solely from the coca plant, a weedy undistinguished shrub that has grown since time immemorial in the hills and jungles of the north-western arc of South America.

Over that same period it has been chewed by local natives who found that its effect was to mute their permanent hunger and stimulate their mood. It rarely produces flowers or fruit; its stem and twigs are woody and without application; only the leaves contain the drug.

Even then the drug constitutes well under one percent of the leaf by weight. It takes 375 kilograms of harvested leaf – enough to fill a pick-up truck – to create 2.5kg of coca paste – the intermediate form – which in turn will provide one kilo of pure cocaine in the familiar white powder form.

GEOGRAPHY: Of the global supply today approximately 10 percent comes from Bolivia, 29 percent from Peru and 61 percent from Colombia.

However, Colombian gangs take over the product of the two smaller contributors at the coca paste stage, complete the refining and merchandise virtually 100 percent of the drug.

CHEMISTRY: There are only two chemical processes needed to turn the harvested leaf into finished product

and both are extremely cheap. That is why, given the desperate poverty of the jungle farmers who grow what is virtually only a very tough and hardy weed, eradication at source has proved so far impossible.

The raw leaves are steeped in an old oil drum in acid – cheap battery acid will do – which soaks out the cocaine. The sodden leaves are then scooped out and thrown away, leaving a sort of brown soup. This is shaken up with alcohol or even gasoline, which leaches out the alkaloids.

These are skimmed off and treated with a strong alkali such as sodium bicarbonate. This mixture delivers a scummy off-white sludge which is the basic paste, or 'pasta'. This is the standard unit of the cocaine trade in South America. This is what the gangsters buy from the peasants. About 150kg of leaves has become 1kg of pasta. The chemicals are easily obtained and the product is easily transportable from jungle to refinery.

FINISHING: In secret refineries, also usually hidden by the cover of the jungle, the pasta is converted into snow-white cocaine hydrochloride powder (the full name) by adding more chemicals such as hydrochloric acid, potassium permanganate, acetone, ether, ammonia, calcium carbonate, sodium carbonate, sulphuric acid and more gasoline. This concoction is then 'reduced', the residue dried and what is left is the powder. All the ingredient chemicals are cheap and, being involved in many legitimate industries, easy to acquire.

THE COSTS: A coca-growing peasant, or 'cocalero', may work like a dog all year harvesting up to six crops from his jungle patch, each crop netting him 125kg of coca leaf. His total production of 750kg of leaf will yield

five kilos of pasta. After his own overheads, he may earn just $5,000 a year. Even after refining to powder, one kilogram can be priced at about $4,000.

THE PROFITS: These are the highest for any product in the world. That single kilogram of Colombian 'pure' rises from $4,000 to $60,000 to $70,000 just by travelling three thousand miles from the coast of Colombia to the USA or five thousand miles to Europe. Even that is not the end. The kilogram will, at the buyer's end, be 'cut' (adulterated) to six or seven times its weight and volume without loss of price-per-gram. The users will finally pay the last dealer in the chain about $70,000 for that sugar-bag-sized kilogram that left the coast of Colombia valued at just $4,000.

RESULTS: These profit margins guarantee that the big operators can afford the finest technology, equipment, weaponry and expertise. They can employ world-class minds, bribe officialdom – in some cases up to national presidential level – and are almost embarrassed by the number of volunteers clamoring to help in the transportation and merchandising of their product in exchange for a cut. No matter how many low-level 'mules' are caught and sent to prison, there are always thousands of the destitute and/or stupid prepared to volunteer to take the risks.

STRUCTURES: After the killing of Pablo Escobar of the Medellín cartel and the retirement of the Ochoa brothers of Cali, the gangsters in Colombia split into up to a hundred mini-cartels. But over the past three years a new and gigantic cartel has emerged that has unified them all under its domination.

Two independents who tried to hold out were found very dead after spectacular suffering, and resistance to the new unifiers ceased. The mega-cartel calls itself the 'Hermandad' or Brotherhood, and operates like a major industrial corporation with, in back, a private army to guard its property and a psychotic punishment squad to enforce its discipline.

The Brotherhood does not manufacture cocaine. It buys the entire product of every mini-cartel as the finished white-powder product. It offers a 'fair' (its own definition) price not on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, but on a take-it-or-die basis. After that the Hermandad merchandises to the world.

QUANTITIES: Total delivered product is about 600 tons per year, and this divides into about 300 tons for two destinations: the USA and Europe, almost the only two continents that use the drug. Given the profit margins listed above, the total profits are not calculated in hundreds of millions of dollars but in tens of billions.

DIFFICULTIES: Because of the vast profits, it may be there are twenty traders between the cartel and the end-user. These traders may be transporters, on-passers or final-sellers. That is why it is extremely hard for the FLO (Forces of Law and Order) in any country to touch the big players. They are massively protected, use extreme violence as a deterrent and never even touch the product personally. The smaller fry are constantly caught, tried and jailed, but they seldom 'squeal' and are immediately replaced.

INTERCEPTIONS: American and European FLO are in a constant state of war with the cocaine industry and

interceptions of cargo-in-transit or captures of depots are ongoing. But the FLO of both continents only achieve around ten to fifteen percent of the cocaine market and, given the staggering margins, this is not enough. It would be necessary to raise the 'intercept' and 'confiscate' levels to eighty percent or more to cripple the industry. If they lost ninety percent, the cartels would implode and the cocaine industry would at last be destroyed.

CONSEQUENCES: Only thirty years ago cocaine was popularly regarded as mere 'nose candy' for socialites, bond traders and Tin Pan Alley. Today it has grown to a massive national scourge causing disastrous societal damage. On two continents the FLO estimate that around seventy percent of acquisitive street-level crime (car theft, burglary, mugging, etc) is carried out to get the funds to support a habit. If the 'perp' is high on a particularly vicious by-product of cocaine called 'crack', insensate violence may accompany robbery.

Beyond that, the profits of cocaine, once laundered, are used to fund other crime forms, especially trafficking weapons (also used for crime and terrorism) and people, most particularly illegal immigrants and abducted girls for the sex-slave trade.

SUMMATION: Our country was quite properly devastated by the destruction in the fall of 2001 of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon, which cost almost 3,000 lives. Since then no American inside the homeland has died from foreign-generated terrorism, but the war on terrorism goes on and must go on. Yet in that decade a conservative estimate must put the figure of destroyed lives through narcotic drugs at ten times that

9/11 casualty cost, and half of these by the chemical called cocaine.

I have the honor to remain, Mr President,
ROBERT BERRIGAN
Deputy Director (Special Operations)
Drug Enforcement Administration

Around the time the Berrigan Report was being delivered by despatch rider to the White House, a British ex-customs officer sat in a nondescript dockside office in Lisbon staring in extreme frustration at a picture of a battered old trawler.

Tim Manhire had spent his whole adult life as an excise man, not always the most popular of professions but one he believed to be profoundly necessary. If revenue gathering for a greedy government from a hapless tourist does not quicken the blood, his job in the dusty back streets of Lisbon's dockland was a fulfilment of a sort, and would have been more so but for the frustrations of that old enemy: inadequate resources.

The small agency he headed was MAOC-N, yet another acronym in the world of law and order. It stands for Maritime Analysis Operations Centre for Narcotics and draws together experts from seven countries. The six partners of the UK are Portugal, Spain, Ireland, France, Italy and the Netherlands. Portugal is the host and the director was a Britisher, transferred from HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) to SOCA (Serious and Organised Crime Agency) to take the job.

What MAOC does is to try to coordinate the efforts of the European FLO and naval forces to counter the

smuggling of cocaine from the Caribbean Basin across the Atlantic to the twin coasts of Western Europe and West Africa.

The reason for Tim Manhire's frustration that sunny morning was that he could see another fish with a big and valuable cargo about to slip the net.

The photo had been taken from the air but beyond taking pretty pictures the patrol aircraft had been helpless to do anything. It had simply passed the image within seconds to MAOC many miles away.

The photo showed a shabby beam trawler on whose bow were the words *Esmeralda-G*. She had been found by a stroke of luck just on the cusp of darkness and dawn in the eastern Atlantic and the absence of a wake indicated she just hove to after cruising unseen through the night. The definition was good enough for Manhire, peering through the magnifying frame above the picture, to see that the crew was about to drape her from stem to stern with a blue tarpaulin. This is the standard practice for cocaine smugglers at sea to avoid detection if they can.

They cruise at night, then spend the day bobbing silently beneath a tarpaulin that blends with the surrounding sea, extremely hard to spot from above. At sundown the crew peels back the tarpaulin, stows it and cruises on. It takes time but it is also safer. To be caught at dawn about to drape the tarpaulin was a giveaway. This was no fish-catcher. Her cargo was already in the hold, up to a ton of white powder, multi-wrapped and baled to prevent salt and water damage, where it had been since loading at a rotten timber jetty in a creek of Venezuela.

The *Esmeralda-G* was clearly heading for West Africa, probably the narco-state of Guinea-Bissau. If only, Manhire groaned, she had been further north, passing the Spanish Canary Islands, or Portugal's Madeira or Azores. Either country could have put a coastguard cutter to sea to intercept the trafficker.

But she was way down south, a hundred miles north of the Cape Verde islands – but they could not help anyway. No equipment. And it was no good asking the line of failed states running in a curve round from Senegal to Liberia. They were part of the problem, not the solution.

So Tim Manhire had appealed to six European navies and the USA, but they had no frigate, destroyer or cruiser in the neighbourhood. The *Esmeralda-G*, having seen the aircraft that photographed them, would have realized they were spotted and would have abandoned the tarpaulin trick to cruise hard for landfall. They had only two hundred nautical miles to go and even at a plodding ten knots would be safe among the mangrove swamps off the Guinea coast before the morrow.

Even after an interception at sea the frustrations did not end. After a recent stroke of luck a French frigate had responded to his plea and found, with MAOC's directions, a coke-carrying freighter four hundred miles out. But the French were obsessed with legal niceties. Under their rules the captured smugglers had to be towed to the nearest 'friendly' port. That happened to be another failed state – Guinea-Conakry.

Then a French magistrate had to be flown from Paris to the captured ship for 'les formalités'. Something about the rights of man – les droits de l'homme.

'Droits de mon cul,' murmured Jean-Louis, Manhire's colleague on the French contingent. This even the Britisher managed to recognize as 'rights of my arse'.

So the freighter was impounded, the crew arraigned and the cocaine confiscated. Within a week the ship had slipped her moorings and sailed. She was manned by her own crew who had easily secured bail from a magistrate who had graduated from a dusty Peugeot to a new Mercedes, and the impounded bales had, sort of, vaporized.

So the Director of MAOC sighed and filed the name and image of the *Esmeralda-G*. If she was ever seen again . . . But she would not be. Forewarned, she would be re-rigged as a tuna fisher and renamed before entering the Atlantic again. And even if she did, would there be another lucky aircraft belonging to a European navy that just happened to be flying past when the tarpaulin was flapping in the breeze? It was a thousand to one.

That, thought Manhire, was most of the problem. Tiny resources and no retribution for the smugglers. Even if they were caught.

A week later the US President sat alone with his Director of Homeland Security, the super-agency that collated and overlorded the thirteen primary intelligence-gathering agencies of the USA. He stared at his Commander-in-Chief in astonishment.

'Are you serious, Mr President?'

'Yes, I believe I am. What do you advise?'

'Well, if you are going to try to destroy the cocaine industry you will be taking on some of the most vicious, violent and ruthless men in the world.'

'Then I guess we are going to need someone even better.'

'I think, sir, you mean even worse.'

'Do we have such a man?'

'Well, there is a name – or, rather, a reputation – that comes to mind. He was for years Head of Counter-Intelligence at the CIA. Helped trap and destroy Aldrich Ames when he was finally allowed to. Then he headed Special Ops for the Company. Almost trapped and assassinated Osama bin Laden, and that was before Nine Eleven. Released two years ago.'

'Released?'

'Fired.'

'Why?'

'Too ruthless.'

'Against colleagues?'

'No, sir. I believe against our enemies.'

'There's no such thing. I want him back. What was his name?'

'I forget, sir. Out at Langley they just referred to him by his nickname. They called him the Cobra.'