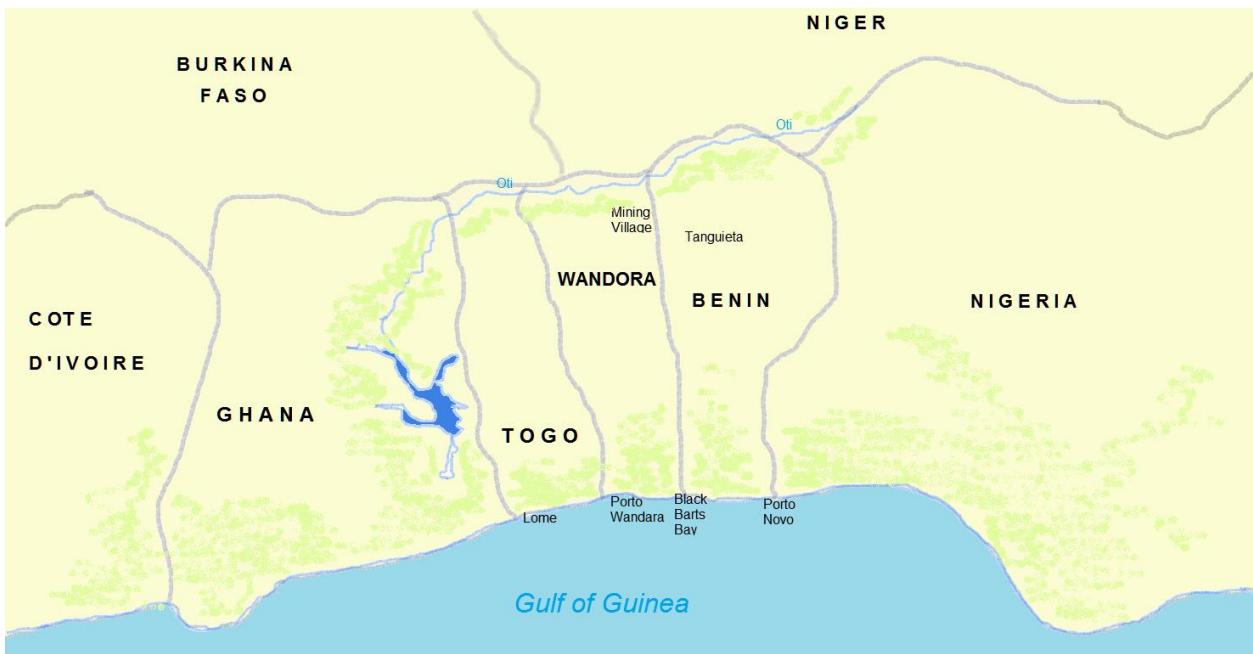


COBALT!

By David Middleton

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."



Chapter 1

The tension is palpable but the voice cuts straight through it. "OK guys and gals. We're right on the money. Still counting. Still running - straight and true. Big bang and fireworks in four minutes."

A quarter of a mile ahead, somewhere in the murky depths of the Gulf of Guinea, if Marcel Bartoll could see what was approaching from behind at around 45 knots he would recognise it instantly. If the scientific team monitoring his every move was not so focussed on their forward cameras, maybe one of them might see it emerge from the gloom. But by then it would be only seconds from impact. Even if they had seen it, even if they had wanted to warn Marcel, what do you say when it is far too late? What do you say to someone you know is about to die? What do you say when there is nothing you can do – but watch?

A sceptical onlooker might have thought the stubble faced man with unkempt hair probably watched far too many American WW2 movies. Ever since the launch a few seconds ago he continues to stare at his stopwatch and listen intently to what can be heard through his headphones. His words, spoken in English, have a pseudo- American sounding drawl. But he is very obviously not American. Eastern European perhaps? Maybe Russian?

In their dimly lit claustrophobic metallic environment, every inch crammed with banks of gauges, switches, dials, buttons, pipes and cables, and which has a unique smell of hot electrics and stale male bodies, his colleagues, concentrating on their respective responsibilities, hear him. They say nothing. Just a few glance in his direction. His words are hardly understandable thanks to the well-worn, very dead and severely frayed stub of a fat Cuban Corona stuck in the corner of his mouth. It looks as if during its lifetime it may have been more chewed than smoked. It has certainly not been lit since they came aboard.

“Three minutes and counting.”

The target, Marcel Bartoll and Karl, have no sense of impending disaster. For Marcel, nothing could destroy this exquisite moment. He is in his element – in the place of his passion and which, like a drug, he cannot get enough of. He adores the serenity, solitude and sheer beauty of deep sea exploration, especially in such a small submersible he and pilot Karl are in. Marcel loves probing places no human has ventured into before, the adrenalin pumping sense of adventure and risk, the excitement of descending into the unknown, the magnificence of the deep.

“Two minutes.” The man with the pseudo-American voice continues the countdown.

“Current 11 knots.” Unlike the other, this is a voice Marcel and Karl can hear. Electronically distorted, it comes from one of the team monitoring their every move from the expedition ship high above them. It cuts through the near silence to give a routine status update. In the background the electric engines propelling the submersible hum quietly. Now and then there is a gentle hiss as more gas is released from the ballast tanks. Otherwise it is a silent world.

“Cliff top wall on camera two.” This second voice, identifiably female, is also tinny in its electronic distortion. Marcel, sitting in the glass-like dome of his craft,

sees it too on one of his monitors and now strains to catch sight of what the enhanced vision of the camera has already seen but what the human eye yet cannot.

The forward lights of his vessel struggle to penetrate the murky gloom of the Gulf of Guinea to illuminate what he is searching for – the top of the cliff face of the recently discovered oceanic trench in this part of the Atlantic Ocean off West Africa. In this underwater fog, everything looks bland and colourless – sea and seabed alike.

"It's like trying to look into a very muddy pond," Marcel told anyone who was listening. Karl nods in agreement. But then into sight comes something different, just discernible parallel lines. He can see them cut into the seabed even though it is still impossible to discern the ocean bottom. He saw these incisions before when the remote vehicle first found the trench. He jabs his finger at them to ensure Karl too sees them. His heartbeat quickens. He knows he is near. Karl inches the craft closer and follows the cuts until at last there it is, the edge of the cliff face at the top of the trench.

Karl manoeuvres their craft forward. They are travelling quite fast now because of the current and it takes an effort to swing the craft rapidly through 180 degrees so they are now looking towards the face of the cliff. A laser beam from the submersible hits the top of the trench wall and dances and shimmers on the rock face. It gives a measure and sense of scale to what is being seen. Marcel's venture into what has become unofficially known as the Guinea Trench is about to start. His sense of excited anticipation is raised several notches.

Apart from the thrill of being where no human has been before, this is a pretty uninspiring place with little sign of any forms of life. That is what he expected. Oceanic experts know the variety of marine flora and fauna here is extremely limited when compared to that of the nearby western tropical Atlantic. What is known as biological poverty results from a lack of coral reef ecosystems because of low salinity and the high turbidity of the water. It is also known that crustal disturbances in the Miocene Epoch millions of years ago created a climate here less receptive to life forms than in neighbouring seas. That made the discovery of a previously unknown sea anemone even more surprising.

How deep the trench is has yet to be determined. The SNEL expedition that originally found it used a deep sea robotic submarine to collect tiny samples of unknown life forms found at a depth of around 1,000 feet. Nothing has yet been to the bottom of the trench and nobody has any idea how deep it is. The minute samples of life forms were recovered from an area of cliff face at the top of the trench where, much to everyone's amazement, the robot sub found the orange coloured sea anemones with white tentacles waving in the current. Scientists were not only puzzled as to why these plant-like, water-dwelling predatory animals were where they were but also how they survived with such low levels of life forms around them. How did they sustain life?

The venom within the tentacles of the sea anemone proved to be completely new to the scientific world. A great deal of excitement followed when it was suggested that the Guinea Trench Anemone, as it quickly became known, might provide medical breakthroughs in a variety of areas, not the least being its potential as a treatment for some forms of cancer.

Exploration of the seabed off the coast of Africa in the Gulf of Guinea was sparked in the aftermath of a tsunami. How much damage had occurred to the seabed and marine life was a matter of intense interest to oceanic experts already concerned about rising levels of pollution and the decline in the life-sustaining capabilities of our seas. In a moment of unforgettable excitement, the remote deep sea probe from Marcel's company discovered the Guinea Trench, explored its upper area and captured small specimens from the sea anemone.

Marine scientists aboard the exploration vessel knew that in recent times organisms such as echinoderms, sea anemones, tunicates, and mollusks have demonstrated biomedical potential. Some of these animals produce a mixture of toxins, commonly known as venom, to protect themselves from predators and to catch prey. Some have stinging cells on their tentacles that inject venom into the animals they touch. It is the venom that excites the biomedical fraternity because often the compounds it contains have the potential to be developed into new drugs.

Experiments on one microscopic amount of venom from the Guinea Trench plant-like cousin of the jellyfish caused great speculation as to its potential value. What was needed were more specimens and some assessment of the quantity of anemone in the trench. That was Marcel's brief. And with the cliff wall now in view

Karl carefully and very slowly guides the craft down into the trench then along the cliff face just a few feet from its top, peering all the time for any signs of the orange coloured plant-like animal. Marcel can already confirm that the few hundred yards of parallel fissures marked into the seabed eventually curve gently downwards to the lip of the trench and that the cliff wall is sheer and vertical and plunges deep and out of sight.

The cliff face itself is marked with upward stripes suggesting some historic volcanic action. In this dark and virtually colourless world, even though he was expecting it, Marcel is shocked when the sub encounters what appears to be a plant stuck in the rocky cliff face. It has an orange centre and white tentacles long enough to wave in the currents.

Now the task falls to Marcel. This is what he is here to do. Despite the strong and fluctuating currents, Karl has to maintain the submarine in one position while Marcel extends its telescopic arm to grab the sea anemone. It does not help that the target is waving almost majestically from its position on the cliff face to which it soon becomes apparent it is very significantly attached.

“Thirty seconds.” The eyes of the man with the tattered cigar remain locked onto his stop watch.

The grab hand of the sub closes in on the strange plant-like animal at a position close to the cliff face and the telescopic arm starts to pull. Marcel’s heart pounds with concentration and excitement.

The explosion when it happens violently rocks the substantial 45 metre long multi-purpose sub-sea expedition support vessel commissioned by SNEL for this expedition. Those least experienced on board thought it would flip. Crew members and the scientific crew from SNEL monitoring Marcel’s activities far below are thrown around, some sustaining bad gashes and bruising. The explosion sounds like a dull but very distinct thud. Seconds later the sea near the expedition craft erupts in a ball of furious water and air. The violent bubble is accompanied by plumes of sea that fountain into the air, some crashing down onto the research vessel and flooding its decks. Research team and crew members hang onto their chairs or grab anything for support. Others are sent flying, some crashing painfully into solid objects. The comms team, including Lotty who had been the main

contact with Marcel, are all screaming in pain as their eardrums are attacked by the noise of the explosion through their headphones.

"What the fuck?" cries SNEL Project Leader Maria Cummings as she staggers back onto her feet in the wheelhouse. Lotty, lying on the floor amongst a chaos of stuff that has been thrown there, is hanging onto consciousness. Petrified at the thought of what has happened to the man she loves, she is nearly hysterical, crying out Marcel's name.

In the chaos Bill Hutton has only one concern. He grabs the microphone from one of the fallen communications operators.

"Marcel. Are you there? Marcel. Karl. Come in Marcel. Marcel. Karl. Answer me."

But there is no response from the deep.

"Marcel. For God's sake. Answer me!" Hutton cries in anguish, looking forlornly at Maria. Lotty sobs. There is no response from the deep. Silence.

Nearby and unseen, the 30 year old ex-Soviet navy diesel engined submarine swings sharply to starboard and heads away from the scene of carnage. Job done.

Chapter 2

The sea surge had taken Wandora's coastal population by surprise. It was not high but it was extremely powerful. The idyllic paradise of silver beaches curving around the deeply forested coast with turquoise shallow waters and palm trees was transformed in an instant into hell itself. Offshore fishermen, holiday swimmers, sunbathers, those in the beach bars were the first to be hit. They had no chance. The few who saw the rushing waters before they smashed ashore tried to run but no human can outrun such an incoming force. People, bars, beach huts, boats of varying sizes – all were swept away as the torrent hit. Only a few escaped - mostly those in recently built, modern, multi-storey holiday apartments fronting onto the beach. Even here, people on ground floors were overwhelmed by water that swept all before it, smashing windows, crashing through doors and gushing through the lower levels of buildings. Those on the balconies above could only watch in horror as events below quickly unfolded. They prayed for the structural

integrity of the buildings in which they stood. For those who survived, the screams of those who perished that day would live with them forever.

Progressing rapidly inland the sea, together with a growing accompaniment of debris and bodies, swept up Porto Wandora's normally dusty high street. Cars, trucks, carts, goats, cows, cyclists, pedestrians – the normal jumble of the capital's traffic, was instantly overwhelmed and engulfed by water. Individuals clung to anything they could grab. Many structures disintegrated, disappearing under the swirling waters taking with them anyone who clung to them in forlorn hope.

Most buildings collapsed but then most were pretty flimsy. Porto Wandora's architecture is – or was - a miscellany of shanty huts, wooden homes, shops and workplaces, and colonial-style brick and concrete buildings occupied by those who could afford them. Many but not all of the latter survived, battered and scarred but still intact, standing in desolate isolation with their surroundings flattened.

It was a day of death, of miracles, of human tragedy, of extraordinary heroic deeds and unselfishness, of unbelievable devastation. Unlike other marine seismic disturbances which create mountainous cliffs of surging water, this sea upwelling sneaked in so as to give no warning to the innocent. Less dramatic in its arrival, it was, nevertheless, cataclysmic in its destructive power.

It is thought the catastrophic and unheralded disaster originated from a subterranean volcano somewhere near the Cape Verde archipelago, some 350 miles off the main African coast. More than 7,000 years ago this area, notorious for its volcanic activity, is believed to have created perhaps the largest tsunami in history when the eastern flank of the island of Cape Verde blew off. This latest event was minute in comparison but disastrous for the thousands who became its victims all along the coast of that western part of Africa.

It shattered the small African state of Wandora (population just over four million) which extends in a narrow belt of territory some 500 miles inland from the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. A former Portuguese then French colony, it only recently celebrated 50 years of independence. It started as a poor nation, remained poor through its colonial years, and is still poor now despite its independent status. Given freedom to manage itself, Wandora split into various factions,

teetered on the brink of a multi-faceted civil war and fell into its current state of nervous stability. The tsunami further deepened Wandora's sad situation.

Disaster sometimes brings out the best in people. So it was with Kevin Forsythe. For most of his working life Kevin had been what some might describe as a pink gin career civil servant. He was the epitome of a Noel Coward Englishman. Now in his late 50s, if asked what he thought of his working life he would probably tell you "Dear boy. It's been mostly a load of old balls, old bollocks and Old Raj" – the last being reference to his much-loved Scottish gin with its connotations to what he considered the glory days of the British Empire.

Kevin Forsythe has lived in Wandora for six years. He moved here from another African state when the British government decided to close its Consulate there as part of a global 'realignment of resources'. For the first time in his career Forsythe, who fully expected to conclude his life in a long and happy, gin-fortified retirement courtesy of a generous pension from HM Government, looked at a future that offered nothing. He was delighted and relieved when opportunity came along to switch to the private sector and manage the Wandora office of a French water company.

Sadly for Kevin that came to an abrupt end. The company had been called in to solve a water crisis. Its solution to water shortages in villages created by the excessive use of water in Wandora's burgeoning mining industry, was to develop new wells and use the water from them to supply the villages. But the solution went, in the words of Forsythe, "tits up big time." It was eventually realised the water company was drawing water from aquifers that originally supplied the country's villages. Rather than cure the problem the actions were making it substantially worse. The company was sacked. Kevin lent heavily on friendships developed in the Wandoran government and eventually secured the task of managing the country's roads and buildings, quickly gaining the confidence of the President and being rapidly promoted to Minister.

But when the tsunami hit, smaller though it might have been compared to more recent devastating examples around the world, Kevin Forsythe, in his capacity as Minister of Buildings and Infrastructure, suddenly demonstrated a side of him not seen before. The tsunami wiped out Porto Wandora. Fishing boats were thrown inland. Roads disappeared. Many homes, stores and offices just collapsed under the pressure of water. The final death toll remains uncounted. In its

aftermath the country's major town is smashed and in chaos. It is taking a huge effort by local people, the army and volunteers to regain any semblance of order. The French, UN, USA and various NGOs have all sent help. The arrival of helicopters is a godsend. It was probably his army training that saw Kevin become a central figure in turning disarray into something resembling functioning order. He has become the liaison between all the helping agencies and a co-ordinator of the clean-up. It has given him a new lease of life.

Quite a few government buildings survived the watery onslaught and Kevin's was one of them. Never the most orderly of places, three days after the tsunami it is in turmoil. Boxes, crates, the occasional oil drum, three ancient bicycles, tools, spades, brooms, piles of assorted and unfiled paperwork and even a tethered goat litter the spacious area Kevin calls his office. Now a constant stream of people come and go, jostling for attention from the small team of Kevin's staff as he tries to orchestrate some semblance of order out of madness. There is much shouting. Frustration is rife as people try to rebuild their lives. Arguments and scuffles constantly break out amongst locals who have called into the office seeking help. In the midst of the chaos he has almost ignored the approach by Pete Turner. A young English geological graduate who has become caught up in Wandora's disaster, Pete was supposed to be travelling the world on a gap year but somehow got stranded in Wandora almost 15 months ago. A combination of depleted funds, the blissful nature of the place and enough odd jobs to scrape enough money to buy food, drink, shelter and the occasional small treat, meant his global trek was suspended for the foreseeable future.

He and Kevin had developed a friendship well before the disaster. Pete often capitalised on Kevin's generous friendship when they spent time together talking about worldly things or playing chess and drinking gin cocktails or palm beer in the sandy terrace of La Cabane du Pecleur on Porto Wandora's main beach. Like all the beach bars, this was annihilated by the flood which simply picked up such structures and destroyed them.

Yesterday Kevin had been deeply relieved to find Pete amongst the survivors.

"You got a minute?" asked Pete, walking into the disorder and general bedlam of Kevin's office without the usual knock on the door. Such a courtesy was no longer possible. The door had gone - swept away in the flood.

“Dear boy. For you, anytime. To sleep – perchance to dream. Not much time to sleep at the moment, old son, and I dream of beach time drinks again. But some hope! And I can’t even shut the fucking door! So it’s open house. Do come in.”

Pete noted the normally immaculate Kevin looked far from his dapper self. The former civil servant fastidiously wore a tie and a hat. Nobody else wore a tie in Porto Wandora. Today it was loosely knotted and hung limply across a dishevelled shirt. His light canvas field jacket was crumpled and dirty. The usual pristine white Panama hat looked slightly stained and battered. Normally clean shaven thanks to a daily routine starting with his trusty cut-throat, utterly out of character Kevin now had stubble.

The rotund, bald headed Englishman swept his hand in a theatrical gesture to indicate the state of his office, the state of the building and the state of the general pandemonium everywhere.

“So what brings you to my emporium of chaos?”

“It’s this. It’s a bit odd,” Pete said, holding out a lump of rock about the size of his hand.

Kevin peered at what Pete held, then looked back at the youngster with a quizzical look. “If I am not mistaken dear boy that’s a bit of rock,” he responded, stating the blindingly obvious and with a reasonable quantity of sarcasm.

“But look at the colour.”

Kevin hesitated, again scrutinising the lump in Pete’s hand. “I don’t want to get too technical but it’s a sort of greyish lump with hints of blue. Yes, I would even extend my limited descriptive abilities by calling it a bit of blueish grey rock! Yes, it is without doubt, a lump of coloured rock.” His tone remained sarcastic.

“Ah yes!” responded the persistent youngster excitedly. “Exactly! When did you last see a stone this colour and this size in Wandora? Between an extremely sandy coastline and an inland desert not that far away, I’ve never seen a stone anything like this in all the time I’ve been here.”

“So what, dear boy?” Whilst the young geological student was clearly animated by his find, Kevin was far from being so.

“I’m wondering what it is? I’m guessing it was thrown up by the tsunami. If so, what is it and where did it come from?”

There was a pause as Kevin Forsythe extended an arm around his young friend.

“Now, my dear boy, it may just have escaped your notice but I am the focal point in trying to engender some semblance of order from chaos. I have dead people floating past my front door. People homeless. People lost. People without food, drink or shelter. A country shattered by an extreme act of nature. I have the army, NGOs and even the United Nations knocking on my door – if I still had one – looking for guidance. And in the midst of all this you stand before me and seek my attention – to a bit of rock!” He swatted his hat at a long feathered bird that dared to enter his building in search of food, missed and turned his attention to the next demand.

Summarily dismissed by his friend, Pete Turner pondered what to do. There was something about the chunk of rock that fascinated his geological mind. Its grey/blue colour made it very conspicuous and so out of character with anything else he had seen in Wandora. His bet was it came from the sea. Thrown up by the tsunami perhaps? What was it? Could it be of value?

Inland, up towards the northern extremity of the country and heading towards an area of rapid desertification, Wandora’s fledgling mining industry was giving new hope to the nation’s dire economy. It was a predominantly Chinese led activity but Pete was aware of the number of geologists involved. Perhaps one of them could tell him what his discovery was? But something held him back. If he showed it to them would they simply take over whatever it was he held? The solution when it came to him was, he thought, quite inspirational. There was a man in England he had worked with for a while. An environmentalist. And if he did not know what this bit of rock was, he probably would know someone who did.

With some difficulty he chipped a piece off the rock, stuck it in an envelope with a scribbled accompanying note, and headed to the airport which had established limited operations since being damaged in the floods. Amidst the bedlam there he found an old contact from an airline that flew to the UK. He asked a favour. Could the envelope be posted in the UK please?

And so a chunk of Pete's rock ended up in the UK postal system with the name and address of the recipient clearly written - Gene Bond and an address near Birmingham, England. The note with it asked three questions about the enclosed sample of rock found in Wandora. What was it? Was it of value? Could it have come from the sea?