

# THE BRASS RING

Lance Mason

**PART I**

**AUTUMN**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Salamanca, September*

Dawn swept across the high plateaux, from Daroca to Arévalo, and then over the plains of Castilla y León. Angled pillars of light fell between the russet towers and chiseled-block turrets of Salamanca's walls, and, from one of these medieval passages, a sturdy, blond-haired man stepped into the sandstone shadows of the Plaza Mayor. Alex Corlett found a seat at an open-air *pastelería* and ordered a pastry and *café-con-leche*. Waiting for the sun to find him again, he replayed the memories that had come during the night.

Towns blown to rubble, farms stripped bare, villagers cut to pieces in the fire-smoke of war -- for months, these crimes had plagued his dreams. He met ashen corpses, families robbed of fathers and sons, and limbless victims of ethnic collisions. This madness came less frequently now, but still haunted his sleep like the residue of sin.

Another grim vision, one of an earlier death, had come, too, in the small hours. Corlett's eyes had burned as he recalled a single body in a room smeared with blood. This was an image from the worst years of his grief, and, though his face had hardened as he relived it, his regret was growing less bitter. Memories of Maya's kisses, of days and nights together, of wine and laughter had begun to expel the ugliness that had once clung to him like stinking rags. For five years Corlett had run from that misery, from the stain of her death. Now, planning the last leg of his journey home, he felt his time—the time to heal—was finally near.

But a larger, unexpected fate was closing in. Before he'd see home, before he'd fall in love again, even before he'd face his own violent death, something here in Spain would find him, something like redemption. Because a final week he'd planned on the Costa Dorada, seven sun-soaked days to purge the last of the pain, would stretch to a month, and give him the key to resurrecting his life.

Meanwhile, on this Salamanca morning, amid the smells of baking bread, he watched the local Spaniards amble through the plaza, their movements as graceful as an undiscovered art. Corlett felt himself seduced by that style, that art. Soon he would taste something like contentment, too, something that would rescue him, finally, from the last of the nightmares—at least until he met *David Gilbért*.

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### *Cartagena, October*

The old, gnarled Caribbean city was not like Gdansk, Wojtek Kudelka's home, a place bludgeoned by decades of Soviet domination, by Russian connivance and extortion—political, financial, hidden and otherwise. No, it was not the same, and the freighter captain found a romantic intoxication in the pungent back streets of Cartagena.

Give me Latin America, the seaman thought. Give me Colombia, with its easy women, its jungle-shore smells, and its wild, *visible* corruption, where one knows the depravity he faces. Certainly Kudelka knew there was real danger, too, but if a man sidestepped the madness of the drug wars, the beatings and the killings, life was good for the survivor.

Kudelka, a cargo skipper, *was* a survivor. And he would enjoy his next thirty-six hours on shore. For on the morning tide in two days' time, he would nose his little vessel, the *Czaszki*, northeast out of Cartagena and out into the Caribbean Sea. Then he would steer a course east by north, through waters Kudelka knew as well as his age-stained face: 14 degrees, 40 minutes north, 61 degrees, 00 minutes west—to Fort-de-France, Martinique, one of those breezy ports-of-call of the Windward Isles that conjures up dreams of turquoise coves and languid self-indulgence.

But expensive indulgence. And the salary of a Polish seaman, even a captain, didn't allow that luxury. So a little contraband, a pliant customs officer, an occasional bribe—they provided for a man's monetary health, for a bit of pleasurable excess.

Money also brings power, and a man needed power. No one can know the future, and Wojtek Kudelka couldn't depend on his mariner's pension to bring him things, to bring him power. So Kudelka had a plan, a financial plan, *and* a plan for that nosy prick of a first mate, Modrzewski. A man had to take risks to get ahead in this world, even risks with other people's lives. So, in a few weeks' time, in Los Angeles, Kudelka would put his plan to work.

A little bent, a little gray, Kudelka sat down on a stool outside El Raton. He leaned back from the smeared, wet tabletop, back against the whitewashed building of this alleyway bar. Over the fraying cuffs of his black officer's jacket, he lit a Gitane and ordered a beer. He listened in the heat to the Spanish-speaking drinkers, and watched, with muddy brown eyes, the schoolchildren walking home. He saw a plain, fat-breasted woman lean out from an upstairs window, and he thought of a dozen delectable whores.

Whores were part of Kudelka's constitution. His idle thoughts always turned to women, any women. In Hamburg and Lisbon and Tenerife. And Rio! Ah, those most beautiful women of Brazil, on the hot, white sands of Barra da Tijuca, when his young life was as fresh as the trade winds' breeze, so many years ago. Now he sat outside a Cartagena bar, wearing out that life, drinking beer on a wooden stool on the foot-path in the afternoon, plotting his moves against David Gilbért.

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*Palos Verdes, November*

The man cradling the portable phone between his ear and shoulder was six feet and lean, and he half-sat, half-stood against an oversized mahogany desk that smelled of lemon oil and leather. A blue-on-maroon Italian necktie complemented his white silk shirt, pleated maroon trousers, and alligator loafers. He had a full head of grey-flecked, wavy black hair swept back above feminine, pale-green eyes. His face was dominated by wide, swooping eyebrows, stretching out black and grim, like the wings of a vulture.

"Hello, this is Gilbért." Though he accepted the American pronunciation of his first name, he always used the French for his family name. It came out "zheel-bayhr."

"Ah, Mr. Gilbért, good day to you." Felix Aragon spoke quickly in a well-bred South American accent. In contrast to Gilbért, he was short and paunchy, and had the dress sense of a middle-aged gigolo on mescaline, sporting an orange cotton shirt with turquoise trim, wide-wale purple corduroys, and rosy ostrich-skin cowboy boots.

"Señor Aragon!" Gilbért replied, "So nice to hear from you."

Aragon was a freight forwarder and, as Gilbért knew, a genius at moving goods through the world's air- and seaports. Though his office décor was attractive and understated, its communications systems were state-of-the-art, their security robust. This was because, as Gilbért also knew, Aragon put his clients' confidentiality first, perhaps even ahead of certain legal details.

"I am calling with news of your latest shipment," said Aragon. "As you know, the *Czaszki* arrived in San Pedro on Tuesday, two days ago. Your container was off-loaded and cleared through customs yesterday, and the trucker should have it at your Santa Monica facility late today, señor."

Gilbért had waited for this news all week. For most of the last month, in fact. His pulse fluttered and thumped, but his face revealed only a thin smile. "Your service, as usual, is impeccable, Felix. But, actually, these wines are moving best from our Glendale warehouse," he lied, "and I'd like them delivered there. You have that address?" Aragon did. "Now, Felix, I've had a word with my tailor, as I told you I would, so please give him a call. He's to put your first shirt on my account."

"Oh, señor, I will contact him immediately," said Aragon, fingering the lapel of a garish, polyester blazer that hung over his chair. "That is most generous of you."

"Not at all, Felix. My pleasure."

The two men concluded some delivery details and Gilbért hung up and speed-dialed another number.

At the other end, a delicate but grape-stained hand, nails bitten to the beds, picked up the phone inside a musty, untidy shed in central L.A. Peter Skidmore was a lab technician. An oenology degree from Fresno State and big dreams of a career in winemaking had both gone down the toilet over a possession-for-sale drugs charge. He'd done his time, but was now little more than David Gilbért's indentured servant, shuttling back and forth between the Gilbért family's estate in the Napa Valley and this old wooden hut in Echo Park. The shed stood behind a small building surrounded by a tall, chain-link fence topped with razor wire. On the fence's gate hung a sign that read *Metro Cleaning and Janitorial*. Electronic scanners cleared the phone line for bugs.

Not waiting for a greeting, Gilbért said, "Saturday morning, Pete, seven-thirty to eight. Four pallets are coming in. I'll need it all done by Monday night, so catch up on your sleep and be ready to roll."

Gilbért rang off and speed-dialed once more, electronics sweeping the line again. "*Georges? David.*" He spoke the names with the French inflection. "We'll be moving from the Glendale warehouse Saturday morning."

"You've got four pallets going over?"

"Yeah." Gilbért sat at his desk, explaining details. "Echo Park's a bigger risk, but the cover's better and the drops are more direct." His brother agreed. "Helene's got the latest on how everything's going for the auction tomorrow, so I'll see you at the hotel tonight. With any luck I'll be able to bring over some of the new samples."

"Look, David, you want to go north until Tuesday? I can oversee the auction and the boys can handle the container."

"*Non, merci.* Too risky. Besides, I'm flying to Caracas midweek. You entertain the family until I get back."

"You know my opinion about this whole thing."

"Yeah, I know." Sometimes his own family's naïveté infuriated Gilbért.

Georges paused, trying to measure the effect of his next question. "*Frérot*, how good is your security?"

Gilbert looked out the window across the Palos Verdes treetops and restrained the urge to shout abuse down the line at his brother. At the same time, he felt the desperation of his answer. "*Merde*, Georges, you don't really find that out until you're under attack."

Gilbert dropped the call and buzzed his secretary. "Helene, I'll be leaving soon. How is it going with the setup for tomorrow?"

Helene Houston sat at her desk in the outer office with a notepad by her hand. Her brunette hair was twisted on top of her head into a smooth bundle held by a single chopstick, and a trace of ginger perfume caressed her elegant neck. "The hotel people are squared away," she said, and then ticked off a list of the items she'd organized—transportation, parking, client hospitality, audio-visual, lecture rooms, food. "When are you headed south?"

"Middle of next week. Can you have the plane at Clover Field when I get back? A week from Sunday."

"Of course. And I'll see you here on Monday. My husband leaves early that morning for his Midwest trip." Helene was as matter-of-fact in arranging adultery with her boss as she was in overseeing his calendar. Gilbert had an obsessive-compulsive side, and his assistant pandered to it.

"I can't wait." It was a lie, and he knew he was already putting too much at risk in this affair, but images from earlier in the week waltzed through his mind.

A morning sales meeting a few days before had been canceled, and Helene had re-shuffled the afternoon so that Gilbert had finished his appointments two hours early. By ten past three, the last one, a South African wine broker, was riding the elevator down to the ground floor. With the outer door locked and the blinds closed, Gilbert had stood at his office threshold watching Helene undress in front of her desk. And she'd watched him. She'd watched him as she unbuttoned the sleeves of her green silk blouse. She'd watched him as she'd taken one slow step toward him, and then another. And she'd kept watching him as she shook loose her hair, unfastened more buttons, and revealed the twin, up-thrust curves of her milky-pink breasts.

A model of chastity in public, Helene was flagrantly seductive when she had David alone. Beneath her street clothes she wore ensembles of call-girl lingerie, and manufactured opportunities to flaunt the body that went with them. Before she'd crossed halfway to him, her blouse had slipped to the floor. His eyes studied the thumb-tip bulge of her nipples through her cream-colored bra, and her eyes found the signs of his arousal, too. With every step, her hands slid her skirt a few more inches up her thighs. Soon, the panties that matched her bra would have been on full display.

Then she'd stopped, raising first one foot onto a chair and then the other, as she unbuckled the straps of her high heels. Gilbert had backed away from his door toward his desk as she'd slid out of her shoes and crossed the floor into his office. No sooner had she swung the door closed and locked it with her left hand than she'd begun unbuckling Gilbert's belt with her right.

Helene Houston and David Gilbert had been dancing the infidelity cha-cha for nearly two years—in secret, of course. The longer it went on, the better the chance of being found out, but they bet against the odds like crap-shooters on a hot streak—he

because of his appetite for calculated self-indulgence, and she because she had little to lose but a take-it-for-granted husband.

Gilbert didn't really know why he carried on with it. Some time ago he had rationalized his views on it all. Access to women was a given in his life, and he didn't need to be involved with one so close to home, but Helene made his life flow and function so well that he chose not to analyze the affair too closely. While others might have criticized her promiscuity, even despised it, he saw Helene as that rare breed of employee who wanted the best for her boss, who even lusted to get closer to him. So, if she had to gratify that lust to be happy in her job, he'd take the risk for her. That's what he told himself.

Back in the present, Gilbert stood at his office door, preparing to leave. "I'm headed over to the Glendale warehouse. Have the Jag sent around front, would you?" He used his private keys to lock his office door, and strode past Helene's desk.

"I just need to finalize the displays at the hotel this evening," she said.

"Great. I'll see you there."

Minutes later, Gilbert was working the Jaguar sedan through the sedate Palos Verdes traffic. He'd have time to stop at his El Segundo plant, and still get across L.A. under the afternoon rush. He accelerated down P.V. Boulevard, and looked west across the expanse of Santa Monica Bay, breathing in the sharp sea air. Warm emotions charged through him—pride, satisfaction—as he relished the view. The cobalt-blue ocean spread out before him deepened his feeling of control, that magnificent sense of power when the world seemed to function, even revolve, under his command.

Gilbert piloted the car through Redondo and Hermosa along the Pacific Coast Highway. Approaching LAX, he hit some road works above Manhattan Beach, turned left down Rosecrans to Vista del Mar, then south through the beach town of El Porto. Once in the industrial section of El Segundo, he turned onto a side street and, a hundred yards down, pulled through a gate in a high chain-link fence. He drove past a small stucco-and-shingle office bearing a large wooden sign that read *Global Wine Imports* and, below that, *Galaxy Wines*.

Gilbert stopped the car near the rear of the office, crossed around to the passenger side and got in, one foot out on the pavement and one in the car. He booted up his laptop computer and, using a 3-G network, logged onto the Internet. As obedient electrons hooked him up, the rear door of the office opened and a professional killer stepped out and began walking toward the shiny, silver-gray sedan.