

The Brass Ring

-- a novel --

By Lance Mason

There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune —
William Shakespeare; Julius Caesar, Act 4, Scene 3

Chapter One

Salamanca, Late September

As day broke, angled bars of sunlight and shade fell across Salamanca's Plaza Mayor. A sturdy, blond man stepped between the pillars and medieval turrets of the city's walls, finding a seat at an open-air *pasteleria*. Alex Corlett ordered a pastry and *café-con-leche*, and replayed the nightmares that had plagued his sleep for months. In these corrupted dreams, he walked with families robbed of fathers and sons, met ashen corpses, and recoiled from the limbless victims of ethnic onslaughts. Towns blown to rubble, farms stripped bare, villagers cut to pieces in the fire-smoke of war—these grisly images still haunted him in a residue of human sin.

In the small hours, once sleep had escaped him for good, another grim vision had come. Restless, with eyes burning, he recalled a single body in a room smeared with blood, an earlier scene from the worst years of his grief. Though his face hardened now 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.

The waiter brought the sweet roll and coffee, and Corlett tried, as he had a thousand times—ten thousand times—to lift himself from the trough of sadness and loss. For five years, Corlett had run from the misery, from the stain of Maya's death. Now, planning the last leg of his journey home, he felt his time—the time to heal—was finally near.

Indeed, before he'd see home, before he'd find love again, and before he'd face his own violent death, something here in Spain, something like redemption, would find him.

Yet, on this Salamanca morning, amid the smells of morning damp and baking bread, he watched the local Spaniards amble through the plaza, their movements as graceful as an undiscovered art. Corlett felt himself seduced by the humanity of that art, and would soon taste something like contentment, something that would rescue him from the nightmares—at least until he met David Gilbert.

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Cartagena, October

The gnarled old Caribbean city was not like Gdansk, the seaman's home, a place twisted by decades of Soviet domination, connivance, and extortion—political, financial, and otherwise. No, Cartagena was different, and the freighter captain found a romantic intoxication in its pungent streets.

Give me Latin America, he thought, with its jungle-shore smells, its easy women, and its wild, *visible* corruption, where one knows the depravity he faces. Yes, there was

real danger, too, but if a man sidestepped the crazy drug wars, the beatings and the killings, life was good for the survivor.

Wojtek Kudelka *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*, out of port, into the Caribbean Sea. Then he would steer a course east by north, through waters Kudelka knew like his own age-stained face: 14 degrees, 40 minutes north, 61 degrees, 00 minutes west—to Fort-de-France, Martinique, one of those Windward Isles that conjure 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, something else man needs. No one can know the future, and 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 Lobo de Mar, his favorite alleyway bar. He leaned back from the smeared, wet tabletop, back against the whitewashed building, and, over the fraying cuffs of his black officer's jacket, lit a Gitane and ordered a beer. He listened in the heat to the Spanish-speaking drinkers, and watched, with mud-grey 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.

Kudelka's idle thoughts always turned to women, especially whores. They were part of his constitution. 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 as he plotted his moves against David Gilbert.

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Palos Verdes, November

"Hello, this is Gilbert." The man used the French inflection for his surname—"zheel-bayhr." Six feet and lean, he cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder as he half-sat, half-stood against a mahogany desk that smelled of lemon oil and leather. A blue-on-maroon Italian necktie graced his white silk shirt. His grey-flecked, wavy black hair swept back above girlish, pale-green eyes under brows like crows' wings.

"Ah, Mr. Gilbert, good day to you." Felix Aragon spoke in a well-bred South American voice. In contrast to Gilbert, he was short and paunchy, with the fashion sense of a middle-aged gigolo on mescaline. He wore an orange cotton shirt with turquoise trim, wide-wale purple corduroys, and rosy ostrich-skin cowboy boots. An international freight forwarder, Aragon was a genius at moving goods through the world's air- and seaports. Unlike his clothes, his office décor was understated, its communications

systems state-of-the-art, with robust security. Aragon put his clients' confidentiality first, perhaps even ahead of annoying legal details.

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

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

Gilbert's pulse fluttered and thumped. He had waited for this news all week. For the last month, in fact. "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 Gilbert hung up and speed-dialed another number.

A grape-stained hand, nails bitten to the beds, picked up the phone inside a musty shed in central L.A. Peter Skidmore's oenology degree from Fresno State and his 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 David Gilbert's lackey, shuttling back and forth between the Gilbert family's estate in the Napa Valley and this hut in Echo Park, crammed behind another small building set back from the street. Hanging from a tall, clapboard fence topped with razor wire was a sign that read *Metro Cleaning and Janitorial*.

Electronic scanners cleared the phone line for bugs. Not waiting for a greeting, Gilbert 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."

Gilbert rang off and speed-dialed again, electronics once more sweeping the line. Using French, he said, "*Georges? David*. We'll be moving from the Glendale warehouse Saturday morning."

"You've got four pallets going over?"

"Yeah," Gilbert said, now in English. "Echo Park's riskier, but the cover's better and the drops more direct than from Glendale or Santa Monica." He got no reply. "Helene's caught up on tomorrow's auction, so I'll see you at the hotel tonight. I'll bring 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."

"No, thanks. Besides, I'm flying to Caracas midweek. You entertain the family until I get back."

His brother paused too long. "You know my opinion about the Caribbean thing. We don't need it anymore."

"Yeah, I know." Sometimes his family's naïveté infuriated Gilbert. He had done the dirty work—very dirty work—for more than two decades, saved the family's future, and now his brother expected him just to fold the tent and walk away.

Georges paused again, trying to measure the effect of his next question. "How good is your security, here and Caracas?"

Gilbert looked out the window across the Palos Verdes treetops and felt the empty desperation of his answer. "*Merde*, Georges, you don't really find that out until you're under attack."

Gilbert ended 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 rose from 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 morning." Gilbert had an obsessive-compulsive side, and Houston pandered to it. "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.

"I can't wait." He was lying again, knowing he put too much at risk in this affair, but images from earlier in the week waltzed through his mind.

A morning sales meeting two days before had been canceled, and Helene had reshuffled the afternoon so that Gilbert had finished his appointments two hours early. The last one, a South African wine broker, was riding the elevator down to the ground floor by ten past three. 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, taking 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 they caressed.

Before she'd crossed halfway to him, her blouse had slipped to the floor. His eyes studied the thumb-tip nipples through her cream-colored bra. With every step, her hands slid her skirt another inch up her thighs. Soon, the panties that matched her bra would have been on full display.

Then she'd stopped, raising one foot onto a chair as she unbuckled the strap of her high-heeled sandal. She undid the other. Gilbert had backed up toward his desk as she'd slid out of her shoes and crossed the floor into his office. No sooner had her left hand swung the door closed and locked it than her right began unbuckling Gilbert's belt.

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

Some time ago, Gilbert had rationalized his views on it all. Access to sex was a given in his life, so he didn't need an affair so close to home, but Helene made his life function so well that he chose not to analyze it too closely. While others might have despised her promiscuity, he imagined 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 smart employers did.

Back in the present, Gilbert stood at his office door. "I'm headed over to the Glendale warehouse. Have the Jag sent around front, would you?" He used a set of private keys to lock his office door.

"Of course." As he strode past her desk, she said, "I just need to finalize the displays at the hotel this evening."

"Great. I'll see you there."

Minutes later, Gilbert was working the plush sedan through traffic. He'd stop at his El Segundo plant and still get across L.A. under the afternoon rush. He accelerated down Palos Verdes Boulevard, looked across Santa Monica Bay into the lowering sun, and breathed the sharp, sea air. Warm emotions charged through him—pride, satisfaction—as he relished the view. The ocean that spread out before him deepened his sense of power, when the world seemed to function, even revolve, under his command.

Gilbert sped through Redondo and Hermosa along 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 pulled onto a side street and 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, picked up the secure office wifi, and logged onto the Web. As obedient electrons did his bidding, the rear door of the office opened and a professional killer stepped out and began walking toward the shiny, silver-gray Jaguar.