

The Brass Ring

-- a novel --

by Lance Mason

PART I

AUTUMN

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

Chapter One

Salamanca, Spain, 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, found a seat outside Café Nero, and ordered a sweet roll and *café-con-leche*. Waiting there, the yellow morning warming the square, he replayed the nightmares that had plagued his sleep for months, grisly images haunting him like a residue of human sin—families robbed of fathers and sons, ashen corpses, limbless victims of random vengeance. He saw towns blown to rubble, farms stripped bare, villagers cut to pieces in the fire-smoke of war.

Earlier, in the small hours, as these visions had faded and with sleep gone for good, a single body had appeared in a room smeared with blood, a black dream from the worst time of his grief. Though his face hardened now as he relived it, his regret was growing less bitter, and he tried, as he had a thousand times, to lift himself from the trough of sadness and loss. For years Corlett had run from the stain of that death, but now, planning the last leg of his journey home, he felt his time—the time to heal—was finally near. His regrets were receding. Memories of her kisses, of days and nights together, of wine and laughter, had begun to expel an ugliness that had once clung to him like stinking rags.

Now, amid the smells of the dawn's damp and fresh-baked bread, Corlett watched the locals amble through the plaza, their movements like an undiscovered art. On this Salamanca morning, Corlett felt himself seduced by the humanity of that art, felt in Spain a sense of contentment to come, something like redemption, perhaps something that would rescue him from the nightmares. What he wouldn't feel coming was the threat of his own violent death—not until he met David Gilbért,

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Cartagena, Colombia, October

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

Give me Latin America, he thought, *with its jungle-shore smells, its sultry, easy women, and its wild corruption*. If it was depravity, it was depravity Kudelka embraced. Still, there were real risks—the crazy drug wars, the beatings, the killings—but if a man sidestepped these dangers, life was good for the survivor.

And if the seaman was anything, he was a survivor, and would enjoy the rest of his time on shore. For in two days' time, he would nose his little vessel, the *Czaszki*, out of port on the morning tide, into the Caribbean Sea. It was a course that he knew like his own age-stained face, steering east by north: 14 degrees 40 minutes north, 61 degrees 00 minutes west, to Fort-de-France, Martinique, one of the Windward Isles, with a busy little harbor that conjured 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, the occasional bribe—they provided for a man's monetary health, for a bit of pleasurable excess.

Money also brings power, something else a 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 a little

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 harborside 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. Looking up, he saw a plain, fat-breasted woman lean out from an upstairs window, and thought of a dozen waterfront brothels.

Kudelka's idle thoughts always turned to brothels and women he could buy. 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, though, drinking beer outside a Cartagena bar, he was risking that life, plotting his moves against David Gilbért from a wooden stool on the footpaths in the afternoon.

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Palos Verdes, California, November

"Hello, this is Gilbért." 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.

"Ah, Mr. Gilbért, good day to you." Felix Aragon, unlike Gilbért, he was short and paunchy, with the fashion sense of a gigolo on mescaline. He wore an orange cotton shirt with turquoise trim, wide-wale purple corduroys, and rosy ostrich-hide 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.

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

"I am calling with news of the *Czaszki*," Aragon said. "It will arrive tomorrow, Tuesday, and your shipment's container should clear San Pedro customs Wednesday. The trucker should have it to Santa Monica the next afternoon, Señor."

Gilbért'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, but these wines are moving best from our Glendale warehouse," he lied, "so I'll need them delivered there, not Santa Monica." Aragon agreed. "Now as promised, Felix, I've had a word with my tailor, so please give him a call. He'll put your first shirt on my account."

"Oh, Señor, I will contact him immediately," Aragon said, fingering the lapel of a neon green-and-silver 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. He speed-dialed another number, and electronic scanners cleared the line for bugs.

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 Gilbért's lackey, shuttling back and forth between the Gilbért

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*.

Before Skidmore could reply, Gilbert rang off and speed-dialed again, electronics once more sweeping the line. In French he said, "*Georges? David*. The goods arrive to Glendale Thursday. We'll move them out Saturday morning."

"To Echo Park?"

"Yeah," Gilbert said, shifting to English. "More street traffic, but the cover's better and drops are quicker than from the warehouses." He eyed some notes on his desk. "Helene's all caught up on Friday's auction plans, so I'll see you at the hotel the night before."

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

"No, thanks, *Georges*." Gilbert insisted on control. "Besides, I'm flying to Caracas then. You entertain the family until I get back."

After a long pause, Georges said, "You know my opinion about the Caribbean thing. We don't need it anymore."

David ignored this, as he always did. His family's naïveté infuriated Gilbert. He had done the dirty work—very dirty work—for all these years, saved the family's future and their fortune, and now his brother expected him just to fold the tent and walk away.

Georges asked, "How good is your security, here and Caracas?"

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