

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.

* * *

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."

Chapter Two

The sounds of gunfire rang across the pewter sea, and the crew of the *Czaszki* cheered. Standing near the ship's rail, the marksman realigned his stance, cradling the rifle's foregrip in his left hand. He studied his sights on the target's bull's-eye twenty meters distant on the stern deck, a man playing chess with his nerves, but the Remington Model 40X .308 rewarded care and practice. The sling now snug on his wrist, he squeezed the trigger and felt the weapon's stock pulse against his shoulder. Then two more shots, two more centers, two more cheers.

"Andrzej, it's a miracle to do that," said Oskar the radioman. "We're making sixteen knots in a ten-knot crosswind."

"Nothing," shouted the chief engineer. "You didn't see him in Vancouver. He was the clear winner, cheated of the medals." The Olympic biathlon was a storied and revered event in Poland, and those watching were riveted to the scene.

"*Bottles*," shouted a man from the deck crew. Three of his mates pulled six empty bottles fitted with corks from a box. Only one more day to the San Pedro docks, and they wanted some fun.

Andrzej Modrzewski cleared the Remington's breach, removed the magazine, and bagged the rifle. From the small table next to him he lifted a Toz 49 revolver, a true classic in the hands of an expert using properly loaded Nagant .762 rounds—when Modrzewski could get them. He loaded six into the cylinder, stepped to the port quarter, and took a double-handed shooting stance.

All six bottles twirled out and hit the sea. As the rolling deck leveled, Modrzewski fired three shots in tight succession. Three bottles exploded in the chop. Again the crew cheered and laughed, grins spreading wide across admiring faces.

As if to prove the engineer's opinion, Modrzewski raised the Toz and fired three more rounds. The last three bottles shattered. The audience, silent, shook their heads in disbelief.

Wojtek Kudelka, captain of the ship, watched from the bridge. He didn't interfere with the show. Modrzewski had friends in Poland, and the crew liked their First Mate. Besides, Kudelka had plans for Modrzewski, plans in Los Angeles, so it was important Kudelka wasn't seen as his enemy. Not yet.

And these containers I take to America, he wondered? What is the Los Angeles man smuggling? Drugs? But why would a man so rich from the wine business smuggle drugs? Why would he smuggle at all? And what is it he's sending down to Colombia on the return trips? The cargo manifests say wine, American wine, and sometimes shoes, cheap electronics, knockoff sunglasses. That's what they say, but what if he is smuggling both ways? What do you smuggle into Colombia? Whiskey? Bourbon whiskey from America? Who knows? There's maybe room for some "squeeze" going both ways.

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Inside his wetsuit, Alex Corlett's skin turned itchy as he worked his toes into the cool sand. He hadn't surfed here for more years than he cared to remember, and it was breaking double overhead today. He thought about the risks as the peaking, late-autumn sets rolled in from the Santa Barbara Channel with a power that could grind you to the bone on the rocks or the bottom.

Corlett watched a swell ride up on the santa ana winds, build into a twelve-foot tunnel, and break down the beach like a runaway train. He was back to ride that train, to reach back to the past, to a part of his life before it split apart in an ugly, dark dream. This beach, on the old

Hollister Ranch was tied to that past, to a time when he had loved a woman so well he'd never thought about danger, about what he could lose. But he *had* lost, and now he was back to try to pick up the pieces.

In the 1960s, for reasons largely forgotten, the coastal section of the Hollister Ranch was sold off in 100-acre sections to mostly local buyers for the views, the silence, and the waves. Beau Corlett, a petroleum engineer, in California to inspect a pipeline route, had found temptation in his path. He bought a parcel on The Ranch for what, the world agreed, looked like lunch money today, and on Beau's death it had gone to Alex. Now, on this sunny November Wednesday, as ragged waves heaved and exploded against the shore, Alex sprung off the sand. His heart rate at the gallop, he tossed his old Yater into the water, and started paddling out. If his debts kept mounting, he knew, it might be the last time he did.

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That night in Santa Barbara, the Indian summer winds died away and left the air rich in desert-flower perfumes, the stars a storm of fire-points across an ink-stained sky. Corlett sat at an outside table at La Paloma Cafe with Fred Gamble, a familiar face he'd run into surfing that day, and another piece of Corlett's past, a rougher piece before Maya.

"Alex, Dude!" Gamble wore his extreme surfiness like a flashy suit, living his own clichés. "You were shredding it today, like you never left."

Alex went along. "Once you get the bugs out, the Ranch is awesome."

"How long's it been?"

"Since I rode the Ranch?"

"Since you went away." Fred was never subtle. "Three years?"

"Nearly four."

"There was talk around after you were gone. Bertram had to fire you?"

"I showed up drunk. More than once."

"I heard about that, about how things went after Maya... after what happened. Anita and I talked once in a while . . ."

Maya . . . Anita. Corlett spun the stem of a eucalyptus leaf between his fingers, thinking about them, two tragic chapters in his life.

". . . Alex?"

"Sorry, Fred. What did you say?"

"Are you going back to building houses? What *are* your plans now?"

"First answer is no. I've been out of the game here too long." Corlett was fudging the truth on that, but Gamble didn't need to know that. "Second answer is that I'll know more after a meeting in L.A. tomorrow."

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It was five past ten on Thursday morning, and the rancid morass of Los Angeles squirmed in a peristaltic quiver. Twelve million people? Fifteen? It seemed to Corlett that people in The City of Angels, this broad, bloated metropolitan animal, lived in fear of the truth, of discovering how squalid the crush really was. With gasoline cheaper than designer water, even breathing here was suicide on the installment plan. This wasn't growth, he thought, but urban obesity on an imperial scale. A line from science fiction came to him: "... ever adaptable, bipeds roamed the teeming streets."

Coming down from Santa Barbara, Corlett had had breakfast in Oxnard at Raul's, a Mexican diner he knew from surfing as a kid. Now, ahead of schedule and off the freeways, he pulled the borrowed Volvo onto Santa Monica Boulevard, took Sawtelle to Olympic, then left. He parked

in a scruffy lot near Pontius and Tennessee and walked back to the entrance of an older masonry building, crossed the lobby, and boarded the elevator for the ninth floor. Inside Room 975, the receptionist answered the telephone: "Department of Commerce—Federal Commercial Service, may I direct your call?" She nodded Corlett into a seat, and a moment later asked him his business.

"Alex Corlett. I have a ten-thirty appointment with Mr. Deaver." The receptionist punched some buttons and spoke Corlett's name into her headset. Ten minutes later, Corlett was drinking coffee in a small, sterile meeting room with Michael Deaver, director of the Federal Commercial Service, Los Angeles Branch.

"You're here about . . . what? Wine, isn't it, Mr. Corlett?"

Dealing with bureaucracies was not his gift, but Corlett shifted his gray steel government-issue chair closer to the gray steel government-issue table. "Yes, I contacted your office because I'm looking to set up an exporting venture." Deaver didn't need to know how big a role wine had played in the Corletts' life before Maya died, nor why Alex felt compelled to relive that connection. "An importer friend in the U.K. will be my first customer, and I have other options." He didn't.

Deaver sipped his coffee from a Styrofoam cup. "We can provide information on overseas markets for American goods, including wine, but not on private businesses, importers, etc."

This didn't surprise Corlett. "My interest is finding the markets," he said, "then signing up the US suppliers and, later, the overseas buyers. But"—Corlett dug into his briefcase and extracted a sheaf of papers—"I came across this stuff on the Web, and then went back to previous years to study the trends. Canada and the U.K. are always near the top as importers of U.S. wine." He handed the photocopies across the desk.

Deaver picked up the pages and flipped through them. "We can give you the most current reports. They're all based on overseas consumption of American goods and services."

Corlett reached over and shuffled some of the pages in Deaver's hands. "I saw something back in 2003 that surprised me. Here." Corlett pointed to a line in the report. "I've asked my contacts in the wine business to explain this, but no one could."

Deaver pursed his lips and squinted at the section at which Corlett was pointing. It showed countries ranked according to the dollar value of American wine they had imported in 2003. Corlett had his finger on the third country on the list.

"Colombia?" Deaver murmured, his tone less bureaucratic. "Right behind Canada and Britain? That *is* a surprise."

"And look." Corlett folded back a few pages. "In previous years, also high on the list, but here"—he flipped to 2005—"it's gone, vanished." Corlett sat back.

Deaver nodded, eyebrows raised, then shook his head. "Could be lots of things—currency fluctuations, natural catastrophe, economic cycle."

"But Colombia—did it have major economic problems after 2003 that it didn't have before? This is like—"

Deaver cut in. "Well, I'm not a Latin American specialist, but the answer may be academic."

This answer startled Corlett. "How can there be a market for millions of liters one year—and year after year—and then zero? Sorry to be argumentative, but that doesn't seem academic." His life, his future depended on this plan. Without it, sooner or later, he'd be on the street.

"By 'academic,'" Deaver said, "I meant the answer might not improve your position." Deaver reached for the phone and punched in an extension. With his hand over the mouthpiece, he said to Corlett, "My best person. Sam Bergmann. Wrote the programs—Hello, Sam! Mike

here. You got a few minutes? Down here with a businessman, a Mr. Corlett. Can you come down and . . . great, great. We're in the conference room."

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An hour later, Corlett was walking to the car. Deaver had been right about Bergmann. The IT expert had given them the details: a 2004 agreement Colombia had signed with Chile and Argentina, part of multilateral trade talks, had barred non-South American wine from coming into Colombia, the U.S.'s third-largest wine customer. No doubt Colombia's southern neighbors were now filling what had once been a huge demand for California wine—and banking the profits.

This might be *academic* to Deaver, but a multimillion-dollar market had been lost from the California wine trade. Corlett couldn't shake the idea that if that market could be reclaimed, it would be him on the way to the bank.