

THE BRASS RING

a novel

by Lance Mason

PROLOGUE

AUTUMN

September, Salamanca

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A tall, blond man with a face that had seen too much death walked to the edge of the Plaza Mayor and seated himself at a small café. He ordered coffee and sat in the shade and waited for the sun to come to him. He ate a sweet roll and thought about travel to far-away places. He thought about learning and about making love and about home.

Suddenly, these thoughts were overwhelmed by images of war. Sitting in the shadows, Alexander Corlett was seared by the visions--memories of children chopped into human carrion, of families decimated, of towns blasted to rubble and ancient temples to dust, with the smell of hot steel and cordite heavy in the air. And, once more, he saw Maya dead, in a room awash with blood.

Corlett had begun this day with images of life, of breathing and touching, of waking with a lover, of eating, of drinking wine and laughing. Now he was wrestling with recollections of misery and death that clung to him like stinking rags, wrestling with a pain he was desperate to escape, a pain that had torn a hole in his once-perfect world. Alone with his fears, Corlett looked for a way to erase the pain, to purge the visions, to wipe the stain of

blood from his life. For four years, he'd been running from that stain, and now time--the time to heal--was running out on him.

But in Spain, something like redemption had sought him out, even before he saw home, before he found Anita again, before he faced his own violent death. Because what he had thought would be a sun-soaked week on the Costa Dorada to purge his soul of the sins of Bosnia and Africa had become a month's education in the joys of life well lived.

Now he watched the Spaniards walking through the plaza to work, and their movements had for him the grace and style of an undiscovered art. Traveling the country, he had tasted something like contentment, too, something that might rescue him from the blood and the death.

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October, Cartegena

Strolling the pungent back streets of Cartegena provided a romantic intoxication for Captain Wojtek Kudelka. Not like Gdansk, Kudelka's home, bludgeoned by decades of Russian domination, by the Soviet system of paper-pushing and political extortion. Give me Latin America, the seaman thought. Give me Colombia. With its

smells and its women and its wild, visible corruption.

Yes, there is danger here, too, real danger. But if I stay out of the madness of the coca trade--the beatings and killings--life can be good.

The freighter skipper would enjoy his next thirty-six hours on shore. On the morning tide in two days' time, he would nose his ship northeast out of Cartegena, then east by north, bearing 085, a course he now knew in his sleep: 14 degrees, 40 minutes north, 61 degrees, 00 minutes west. Fort-de-France, Martinique, one of those breezy Caribbean ports of call that conjures up dreams of languid self-indulgence.

But expensive indulgence. And the salary of a Polish ship's captain didn't allow that luxury. So a little contraband, a cooperative customs officer, an occasional bribe--they could provide for a man's financial health, and for a bit of expensive indulgence.

Wojtek 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. A man needed power, the power that money brought. No one could know the future, and Kudelka couldn't depend on his seaman's pension to

bring him the things he needed. In Los Angeles, in a few weeks' time, he would put his plan to work.

Kudelka, a little bent, a little gray, sat down on a stool outside an alleyway bar. He leaned back from the smeared, wet table top, back against the whitewashed building. Over the fraying cuffs of his officer's jacket, he lit a cigarette, and then 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, breasty woman lean from an upstairs window, and he thought of the Cartegena whores.

It was 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 he was a young man, when his life was as fresh as the trade winds' breeze. Now he sat on a wooden stool outside a Cartegena bar, drinking beer, wearing out that life on the foot-path in the afternoon.

PART I

A WEEK IN NOVEMBER

CHAPTER ONE

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Alex Corlett's skin turned itchy in his wet suit. The Ranch was breaking double overhead and he hadn't ridden here in more than five years. He worked his toes into the cool sand, tuning into the tension that came with hanging off the brink. And these humped-up autumn swells, rolling in from San Miguel Island, took you to that brink, to the blunt edge of danger--fifteen foot waves, whipped by the the santa anas, breaking like a train running on lightning.

Corlett was back at The Ranch to ride that train, to reach back to his past, to a part of his life before it

split apart in a room slaked with blood. This beach was part of that past, part of his life when he'd loved a woman so well that he'd never thought about danger, never thought about loss. But he had lost. Now he was back to find something, to start picking up the pieces of what had broken apart.

Hollister Ranch is an artifact of history, something not swept away in the awful march toward tomorrow, but not for want of greed or treachery or deceit. It wasn't for want of ambitious intent that this stretch of California coast was salvaged from the tactics of the money men. It was just that meddling old crank timing, interfering again in the affairs of men, that salvaged it. Pedestrian, political, anti-logical timing--and that piece of Spanish American history squats there, surviving, handed down from the Ortegas to the Hollisters to the bureaucrats to, finally, a loose handful of squabbling, comfortable, protective owners whose legacy has been to keep out the money men.

Timing. It brought Beau Corlett back to California in the late 1960s, brought him to Hollister Ranch to inspect a pipeline site, put temptation in his path. Beautiful timing, and Beau caved in to temptation and bought 100 acres at a price that looked like loose change on this

Wednesday in November thirty years later as Beau's son sized himself up against the spuming, crashing tubes on the Pacific's ragged rim.

Alex Corlett tossed his big-wave Yater into the water and started paddling out.

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That night, the santa anas died and left the air rich in desert perfumes, and the stars a storm of fire-points under an ink-stained sky. Corlett sat at an outside table at La Paloma Cafe having dinner with Fred Gamble, a familiar face he'd run into that morning at The Ranch. Gamble was from another piece of his past, a rougher piece, a piece before Maya.

"Alex, I caught you in the green room a couple of times today. You were shredding the place like you'd never been away."

"It still an awesome break, especially when it's big. I felt okay after I got the bugs out."

"How long's it been?"

"Since I surfed The Ranch?"

"Since you went away--three years?"

"Nearly four. But I spent a year here drinking before that, before P. J. kicked me in the ass, got me out of town."

"Yeah, I heard. Drinking on the job or something?
Bertram had to fire you?"

"Showed up drunk. More than once. Bertram let me
resign. Saved a bit of face."

"Yeah, there were rumors around town after you left.
About how things went after Maya died. Anita and I talked
once in a while . . ."

Maya . . . Anita. The two names clouded Corlett's
attention, took him away from the here-and-now. Two women,
two chapters of his life, as different as the sea and the
sky. He spun the stem of a eucalyptus leaf between his
fingers.

"Alex . . . Alex?"

"Sorry, Fred. What did you say?"

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

"First answer is no. Second answer is that I'll know
more after a meeting in Los Angeles tomorrow."

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It was five past ten on Thursday morning and Los Angeles,
with a peristaltic quiver, squirmed under its own weight.
The place smelled its own decay. Twelve million people?

Fifteen? No one knew. Angelenos lived in fear of finding out the truth, of discovering how bad it really was. Where did they take the garbage of this flattened animal of a city? What beaches had bacteria counts that weren't life-threatening? How had commuter road rage become a recreational pastime? Gasoline was half the price of designer water, and breathing the air was suicide on the installment plan. But, ever adaptable, bipeds still roamed the streets.

Alex Corlett pulled the borrowed Volvo off the 405 onto Santa Monica Boulevard. Coming down from Santa Barbara, he'd stopped in Calabasas for breakfast. Now, ahead of schedule and off the freeways, he merged with the inescapable welter of humans on the move. He took Sawtelle to Olympic, turned left, and parked in a scruffy lot near Pontius and Tennessee. He walked back to the entrance of 11150 Olympic, 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 sitting in a small, sterile meeting room with Michael Deaver, the director of the Federal Commercial Service, Los Angeles Branch. They drank coffee from Styrofoam cups.

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

Corlett shifted his government-issue chair closer to the government-issue desk. "Yes, I contacted your office because I'm looking into setting up a wine exporting venture. Wine's a business my late wife and I had some interest in. I've got a friend in the UK who's an importer, so he's my starting point. But I want to look at other options, too."

"We can provide you with extensive information on overseas markets for American goods, including wine. But we probably can't help you with names--suppliers, exporters, importers, and so on."

Corlett nodded. "My interest with the D.O.C. is in finding out where the markets are. It'll be my job to find and sign up the suppliers. But"--Corlett dug into his briefcase, extracted a sheaf of papers--"I came across this stuff at the library. They aren't the most current. In fact, I went back to previous years to study the trends.

Canada and the U.K. are always at or near the top as importers of U.S. wine."

Deaver flipped through the library references. "We can give you current figures for these and similar reports, or you can get them off the Web. They're basically designed for information on overseas consumption of American goods and services."

Corlett shuffled some of the pages in Deaver's hands. "Back here in 1983, I saw something that surprised me . . . here." Corlett pointed to a line in the report. "I've asked my friends in the wine business if they knew anything about this, but no one does."

Deaver pursed his lips and squinted at the section at which Corlett was pointing: "Table 6. Agricultural Exports: U.S. and California Port District Totals, Calendar Year 1983, 1673100, Still Wine Not Over 14% alc." All the wine importing countries were ranked according to the total value of the American wine they had imported. Corlett had his finger on the third country on the list.

"Hmmm," Deaver murmured, "yeah, that is a surprise."

"Yeah, and look back here." Corlett shuffled a few more pages. "In previous years, they were way up there, too. But here"--he flipped forward a few pages--"they're gone. Vanished from the list."

Deaver nodded, eyebrows raised. "Could be big currency fluctuations. Natural catastrophe. Economic cycle. Trade legislation."

"But that country--did it have major economic problems after 1983 that it didn't have before then? This is like--"

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

"Why academic? How can there be a market for millions of liters one year--and in fact, year after year--and then zero."

"Let's find out." Deaver reached for the phone and punched in a four-digit extension. With his hand over the mouthpiece, he said to Corlett, "My best person. 'Hack' Bergmann. Wrote the programs--Hello, Hack! Mike here. You got a few minutes? Well, listen, I'm down here with a businessman, a Mr. Corlett. Can you come down and try to give us a hand? 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 and about the trade legislation. The IT wonk had given them the details: a 1984 trade deal barring non-South American wine from entering what had been

the U.S.'s third largest customer. It had been part of multilateral trade talks in the O.A.S. Probably Chile and Argentina were now filling what had once been a huge demand for California wine, and banking huge profits.

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