

THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST RING

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Translated from the original Bulgarian by means of AI

First edition: 2026

Design and layout: Barrydoor Uitgeverij

Printing: Bookmundo

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Barry Cussel

THE MYSTERY
OF
THE LOST RING



BARRYDOOR
UITGEVERIJ

This novel is dedicated to my beloved wife Teddy, who gave me our wonderful daughter Nina – a daughter of whom I am endlessly proud.

Barry Cussel

“The Mystery of the Lost Ring” – a novel about the wonders that surround us

Written in 2015, this novel is the second literary work by Barry Cussel. At that time, the author was 57 years old – a mature man, rich in life experience and wisdom. Although his views have changed over the years, he remains faithful to his belief in reincarnation and in the magic of destiny. In this novel, he doesn’t merely tell a story; he creates a world where reality and fantasy intertwine to convey a profound message.

A story inspired by real events

The Mystery of the Lost Ring is not just a fairy tale or fiction – it is inspired by a true story. This is a tale in which magic is not merely a literary device, but a metaphor for the power of love, fate, and choice.

At the center of the plot stands an extraordinary object – a golden ring, forged centuries ago in Byzantium. It was crafted by a skilled master, created not only with his hands but with his soul and the greatest love ever known. According to legend, this ring holds an indestructible energy, passing through the ages, guarded by the mysterious “Pale Ones” – beings who possess the secrets of time and space.

But this ring is not an ordinary ornament. Whoever touches it faces a fateful choice – either to be blessed with immeasurable happiness and eternal love, or to be drawn into the abyss of suffering and darkness. What is the secret of the ring? Does it carry a curse, or does everything depend on the person who owns it?

Miracles exist – we just have to believe.

Barry Cussel’s novel does more than entertain the reader – it invites reflection on deep philosophical questions. Do miracles happen only in books? Or are they all around us, though we do not always notice them?

After turning the last page of *The Mystery of the Lost Ring*, you will find yourself asking one question:

Are miracles perhaps closer than we ever imagined?

Because they truly happen – if only we believe.

Part 1

Island of Thasos, Byzantium, 666 AD

Peloponia woke up with sore muscles in her legs and arms. Her large bluish-gray eyes opened with difficulty. Her shiny black hair was tangled around her slender, sun-bronzed body. It was no coincidence that the soldiers in the garrison called her “The Graceful Kitten.” Her beautiful face always radiated joy, and the familiar smile never left it.

But not this morning.

A playful, lustful sunbeam peeked into the room and caressed her delicate hands. The ray reflected off the ring that fit perfectly on her ring finger, making the room shine even brighter. Forged from pure gold, shaped like a garden labyrinth, the ring emitted not only light but also boundless, until recently untouched, love.

The young woman drew back the silk canopy of the arched bed, sat up, and for a moment drifted back to the night spent by the sea.

A night both blissful and ominous.

She had danced so much with the young man everyone called Titos that even now, at the mere memory of it, her head spun and pleasant shivers ran through her body.

Peloponia was the daughter of the commander of the garrison, General Maximus. For several years she had lived with her father in the newly built military fort on the seashore of the island of Thasos.

That evening they had celebrated her twentieth birthday among the select, though small, society of the

island. All the important military leaders from the region of Kavala and their wives had been invited to the lavish feast, abundant with food and wine. Also present were several local nobles from the island with their spouses, a few of their servants, and a small group of musicians and dancers.

Titos was one of the dancers — a handsome young man, about twenty-five, with a beautifully sculpted body. Yet he was the illegitimate son of Mad Giacomo, a ruthless sea pirate, and a poor local widow of a blacksmith. No one knew this secret except Titos's mother. To everyone on the island, he was the son of the beloved "Master" — as his supposed father was called — a skilled smith of weapons and fine gold ornaments.

Less than a year before Titos was born, however, the pirate and his band of forty bloodthirsty cutthroats had raided the island and killed the Master in a brutal way. He had cut off his head and impaled it on a stake, placing upon it a crown recently made by the goldsmith — a crown shaped with golden olive branches. Then Giacomo had raped his wife before the lifeless gaze of the severed head, but did not kill her — he left her alive to raise the child she conceived. If it were a boy, he had plans for him.

And so it happened. The boy grew, and Giacomo would occasionally visit the island. Deep inside it, in a large cave, he had built one of his pirate bases. But when Izura, his new lover, appeared, he stopped coming altogether.

Titos grew up with his uncle Yorgus and his cousin in the workshop, learning the blacksmith's craft. His uncle was also a skilled master and taught the young Titos to handle the hammer well by the age of eleven.

His mother was often not herself — she shouted at dogs, stared strangely at the sky, repeating the name of her

murdered husband. Titos grew up without ever learning the truth about his father and Giacomo. Whenever she regained her clarity, his mother thought of telling him but lacked the courage. She postponed it, wanting the boy to become a man first.

They called him “The Little Master.” His beauty and well-built body did not go unnoticed by the women of the island. Many noble young ladies came under the pretense of ordering some gilded trinket, but their true intention was different — they simply wanted to see him, to admire him. To their disappointment, however, Titos paid them no attention, for his heart longed only for Peloponia.

Titos loved to dance in his free time, which is why he was accepted into the local dance troupe. That allowed him to perform at the fort’s events — entertaining the wealthy and, most importantly, seeing Peloponia, the woman he desired and for whom he would give anything just to look upon her beauty.

For the first time, the young man had the chance to touch her when her father brought her to the workshop. The general entered first, smiling yet stern, and said,

“Could you make the finest golden ring in the world for my daughter, Peloponia? I will pay you well, Master. I want it to bear ancient Greek motifs—the labyrinths. The labyrinths that lead to the soul.”

Titos replied with deep respect and visible nervousness.

“I am not the Master, General. I am his son. But thank you for calling me that. My father would be happy if he could hear you say it.”

The general turned toward him and patted him on the shoulder.

“I want to give it to her for her birthday next week. What will you need, Master?”

The young man blushed. Slightly embarrassed, yet with a faint smile, he answered,

“Her.” He looked the general straight in the eyes and added, “To take the ring’s measure, of course.”

The general burst into loud laughter and this time slapped him on the other shoulder, a bit harder than he should have.

“Joker! You’re quite something! Hey, I’ll call her right now. She’s outside.”

When Peloponia entered the workshop, it was as if the sun itself had stepped inside. Titos was blinded by love. The girl, too, was struck by the young blacksmith’s appearance. There was a spark of attraction in her eyes, her heart began to race. The general sensed the mutual sympathy and decided that they had to finish quickly and return to the fort. There could be no further contact with this blacksmith, even though he himself rather liked the boy.

Titos took the measure of her finger, trembling. The mold slipped from his hand several times. He didn’t know what was happening to him. The touch of her delicate fingers paralyzed all his senses. He felt as if he were touching a deity, not an ordinary girl.

From that moment on, he thought of her day and night. He knew, however, that their love was impossible — that her father’s rank would never allow a bond between a blacksmith and the daughter of the most powerful military commander in the region. He knew it, yet he dreamed that one day she might love him so deeply that they could run away together — somewhere far away, where only the two of them would exist, and no one else.

He worked tirelessly, devoted only to that ring. The gold had been delivered in bars, personally by the general's adjutant. Never before had Titos worked with such love. He longed for dawn to come so he could begin shaping the labyrinths. Each element he joined with such precision that not a single edge or crack was visible. He had his own secret.

Cooling the metal required great care, and he was a master of it. No liquid was better than sweat — the sweat that dripped from his brow in rhythm with his thoughts of her, the girl of his dreams. The other liquid was tears — the tears that fell from his eyes at the thought that his dream of being with her could never come true.

The result was perfect elegance!

The surface of the ring began to resemble a living labyrinth. When you looked at it, you felt as if you were wandering in a mysterious garden, unable to find the exit, even if you walked endlessly through it.

At last he finished his work, and when he placed the ring on the table, something extraordinary happened. A few rays of sunlight struck the golden surface and reflected so strongly that Titos was almost blinded. He covered his eyes with his hands, but it didn't help. He could see almost nothing — only with his peripheral vision he sensed the presence of a being sitting at the table. It held the ring in a hand with long, slender, elegant fingers, ending as if with nails painted white.

Titos instinctively jumped aside and turned his back to shield his eyes from the radiance. The shadow projected on the wall revealed the silhouette of the creature — a graceful, muscular body.

“This can only be the Devil himself!” Titos thought and turned to face it. He was not afraid. The glow vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. The young man stared at the being — it seemed made of blood and flesh, yet it wasn’t truly so. It looked more like a projection, a shadow. A symmetrical head, very short white hair, a pleasant smile, and light-blue eyes. The face was so pale it was almost transparent, with a white sheen. It stood up and approached him, almost gliding above the ground.

It placed the ring into what looked like a plaster mold, and with just a movement of its finger, it ignited a flame stronger than any Titos had ever seen. Then the being blew softly, and from its mouth came a bluish mist that floated through the labyrinths of the ring and settled there, tinting the gold with a faint orange hue. The magic was complete.

“This ring is the key to our world, my lord. When you are in need, rub it in linen cloth and say the words: ‘Et immortalitatis gloriam tempore infinitos’. Then you shall appear among us — the Pale Ones. Returning here will be difficult, almost impossible. Use it only in utmost need,” the being murmured, and vanished into nothingness, as suddenly as it had come.

The ring spun in the air from the gust it left behind and fell to the ground. Titos picked it up but did not rub it against his shirt — which indeed was made of linen — for he assumed the vision had been a delusion caused by the excessive heat from the furnace. The words spoken by the being soon faded from his memory.

He continued polishing the inner side of the ring, and just as he was preparing to place it into the hardening bath, the general himself appeared, accompanied by his adjutant.

Part 2

During the birthday celebration, Titos and Peloponia danced with pure passion.

Her father noticed them and could clearly see the strong affection between the two.

He didn't like it — the other noble guests had seen it too. They whispered to each other, pointed at the couple, and smiled secretly behind their fans.

Then Peloponia whispered in Titos's ear:

“Look how everyone is watching us with envy, aren't they?”

And she threw herself into an even more passionate dance. Then she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and wished she could shout to the whole world: “He's mine!”

Her father was about to tell her to behave more modestly toward the young man, but he knew it was her birthday and that she would not take his words kindly. He also knew how headstrong his daughter was — a single remark could easily lead to a quarrel.

He had already promised Peloponia to Kuruks, the son of a regional noble. Their families wanted to unite, to strengthen their influence on the island and across the province. But neither the general nor Kuruks's father knew that the young man himself was also in love — not with Peloponia, but with Titos.

The celebration was at its peak when all the dancers left the wooden dance platform inside the high-walled fort and

moved toward the seashore. The distance was short, so they could return quickly if needed.

The waves gently caressed the sweaty feet of the young dancers. Peloponia never left Titos's side — not for a single dance. This displeased the other young men, who all wanted to attract the beauty's attention too.

Corientus, the son of the fort's third-ranking officer, was known for his arrogance. He approached the dancing couple and deliberately bumped Titos with his foot, pretending it was an accident. Corientus was sly and cruel, with a strong muscular build, and always carried small dagger-shaped blades hidden in his clothes.

Titos ignored the incident and continued to hold Peloponia's hand. But moments later, he felt a sharp pain in his ankle. He looked down and saw blood flowing freely. Not wanting to ruin those divine moments with the girl of his heart, he stepped deeper into the sea with her, up to his knees, still dancing.

When they were far enough from the shore, the inevitable happened: they kissed passionately, embracing each other in ecstasy. They forgot that the world existed and gave in to what is human nature.

Peloponia lifted herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist. She pressed her lips fervently against his — they became one. Their passion was so intense that the girl felt not sharp but sweet pain between her thighs. Their blood mixed together. Something was conceived — something they both deeply desired.

When they returned to the shore, blood was still flowing — from both of them.

Corientus entered the water too, together with his blond partner, and sneered:

“Peloponia, there’s blood around you! Did the blacksmith hit himself with his hammer? Ha, ha, ha!”

Titos couldn’t bear the insult. He released Peloponia and lunged at him. They grabbed each other by the throat, and the sea pulled them farther out. Titos was not a strong swimmer, unlike his opponent. Corientus knew that and began to drown him once they reached the deep water. After a few minutes, Titos sank to the bottom, nearly unconscious.

Then something unexpected happened.

Kuruks rushed into the water. He couldn’t let the boy he secretly loved die.

He dove into the deep, found Titos quickly, dragged him to the shore, laid him down for a moment, and kicked the approaching Corientus hard in the face. Corientus fell unconscious. Kuruks tied his hands with a piece of seaweed that floated nearby, removing him from the fight.

Everyone gathered around them.

Titos and Corientus were lying on the sand — but to everyone’s shock, Kuruks pressed his lips to those of Titos. He kissed him and cried, believing he was dead. He beat his fists against Titos’s chest — so hard that Titos coughed, spitting out seawater from his lungs. He came back to life.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Kuruks’s lips still on his. He looked into his eyes and saw love there. But Titos didn’t share those feelings for men, and simply said:

“Thank you, Kuruks. I’ll be forever grateful, but... you know...”

He turned his head and saw Corientus lying a few meters away, still unconscious. Titos stood up, went to him, and slapped him several times until he came to. Corientus woke up and ran away toward the fort.

Peloponia had watched the whole scene from a distance, crying, unable to believe what was happening before her eyes.

Titos embraced her and shouted to everyone:

“Let’s dance! Let’s dance!”

They returned to the fort and carried on as if nothing had happened.

But none of it had escaped the general’s watchful eye.

“Come to the table!” Maximus announced with quiet satisfaction that the incident at the shore had ended peacefully.

“And let the dancers join us as well!”

It was unusual for such celebrations, but it seemed the general wanted to bring his daughter true joy.

And the gift he was about to present — his next gesture as a father — had been crafted by none other than the dancer, Titos.

Many of the high-ranking guests exchanged surprised glances at the host’s words, but tried to appear courteous, hiding behind their polite masks.

The dishes were exquisite, and after so much dancing, the young people were eager to begin.

Peloponia sat beside Titos, her face glowing with happiness, her radiant smile spreading warmth to everyone around the table.

Laughter and teasing filled the air.

The youths joked about what had happened at the shore — not everyone had fully understood the scene — and they laughed loudly at how Kuruks had kissed Titos instead of giving him mouth-to-mouth.

The feast began. Wine flowed freely, and roasted wild boars and all sorts of game were served.

The celebration reached its peak when General Maximus rose, shook something that looked like a small bell, and announced he had something important to say.

Everyone fell silent and turned toward the host.

“My dear guests,” he began, taking a small black box from his pocket and speaking in a solemn tone:

“Today my daughter Peloponia turns twenty, and I wish to present her with this ring —

a ring made by the son of a man we all knew, the one we called ‘The Master’.

The man who made our island famous and respected in Constantinople and Rome.

The man who forged the crown of our Emperor.

Sadly, The Master is no longer among the living.

You all know how Giacomo took his life, as well as that of my wife.”

Tears filled the general’s eyes, but he continued:

“The son of this exceptional islander is no less talented.

His name is Titos, known to you as ‘The Young Master’.

Before me lies the gift he has created for Peloponia!”

Maximus raised the ring high so that everyone could see, and opened the box.

The moon, which had been hidden behind a cloud, now emerged — bright and full.

The ring shone so intensely it seemed as if day had dawned and the sun had risen.

The guests gasped in awe at the blinding radiance.

Even Maximus was taken aback by the miracle, but quickly regained his composure and turned to Titos:

“It seems you have surpassed your father, Young Master! What have you created?”

Titos stood and said shyly but clearly:

“It was made with... a lot of love, my lord,” he stammered, then added,

“That’s why it shines so brightly, I think...”

Everyone shivered at those words — they all knew for whom that love was meant.

It was not proper to say such things, even if they were true, especially in such a setting.

Maximus paused, thinking. But he decided not to spoil his daughter’s birthday.

“I understand you, boy. Love for our fort — and the same love your father once gave us.”

“Yes... that’s right,” Titos confirmed, and looked toward Peloponia.

She shone even brighter, stood up and said:

“Thank you, father! I can personally feel Titos’s love for our fort. This gift is the most beautiful one I’ve ever received.”

She took the small box and placed the ring on her ring finger. The girl’s consciousness seemed to blur. She was no longer herself. Then something happened that no one could have ever predicted.

Peloponia walked gracefully toward Titos, forgetting where she was, forgetting even her father’s presence. She pressed her lips passionately against the young man’s, and in her eyes there was already the clear madness — the madness of love.

Titos did not pull away. He answered her madness with his own. He embraced her, and the kiss would have lasted forever if Corientus hadn’t intervened violently:

“You filthy bastard, you don’t belong here. Pauper! Peloponia is promised to me. She is mine. Go back to your workshop—now!”

Titos couldn't bear the insult and headbutted him. Corientus fell to the ground but immediately stood up again. With a perfectly calculated leap, he landed behind his opponent. He was a trained young man and knew how to fight well.

Just as he was about to strike from behind, Titos instinctively turned and with a strong saber blow to the throat knocked Corientus down again. This time, the blow was fatal.

Titos bent over the unconscious young man and realized he was lifeless.

Then the guards intervened, seized the Little Master firmly, and dragged him toward the dungeons beneath the fort.

Peloponia watched everything as if it weren't happening before her. Her gaze was madly fixed on the dead Corientus, visibly enjoying his death.

Then her father, General Maximus, took her by the arm and whispered to his aide to announce that the celebration was over and that the guests could leave.

He led her to her bedroom and laid her on the bed. Peloponia was incoherent. She laughed mockingly and repeated:

“That's what Corientus deserved!”

Her father took a bottle from the shelf — an herbal sleeping potion — and handed it to her. She drank almost half and fell asleep immediately.

The general left the room, wondering what to do. His daughter seemed to have gone mad. The son of his friend was dead, the celebration ruined, the guests gone, and by tomorrow all sorts of rumors would spread — even reaching the emperor. Early in the morning, he would go to the

prison to speak with Titos. What had this boy done to turn his life so completely upside down?

Part 3

In the morning, despite the large amount of potion she had drunk, Peloponia went down for breakfast. Only fragments of the night flickered through her mind. She looked at the ring — a gift from her father, crafted by her beloved Titos. Madness seized her again with terrible force, flooding her with rays of energy coming from the ring. It was mysterious, and she felt it more with every passing moment.

“Father, where are you?” cried the girl as she entered the dining room.

“The General isn’t here, Peloponia,” replied the maid, frying some eggs. “He went to the prison on business. He said you should eat alone.”

“Yes... he’s at the prison with Titos. I must go there too!” the girl remembered the end of the celebration.

“I’m not hungry. I’m going there,” declared Peloponia and slammed the kitchen door.

“But you can’t go there, dear child!” protested her governess, just entering the room. “Your father ordered me to keep you here until he returns.”

“Try me!” snarled Peloponia, grabbing a sharp kitchen knife from the table.

The governess had never expected such a reaction. She had never imagined the girl could behave like that.

With the knife in her hand, Peloponia left the house and headed for the prison dungeons.

The building was not far from the general’s home, so she soon stood before its gates. As always, soldiers armed with swords and shields guarded the entrance. They all

knew her, so passing through was no problem. Later, they would whisper among themselves: “The graceful kitten passed by!” and one dream always lingered in their minds “To have her in our arms!” But they knew it was impossible.

Peloponia crossed the inner courtyard and rushed down the stairs toward the cells. The corridor was dark and ominous. The air smelled stale and sickening, but she didn’t notice. It was as if the ring had enchanted her. She passed the head guard, who looked at her and nodded.

“The General is inside, but he didn’t say he expected visitors. Wait a moment, Peloponia; I’ll inform him you’re here.”

“No need! This is a matter of life and death for me!” she shouted and ran toward the cells where the condemned served their punishment.

The guard tried to stop her, but Peloponia raised the knife and threatened to use it if he didn’t step aside. He moved immediately — fighting with the General’s daughter was out of the question.

She continued deeper into the dungeon. Torches lit the stone walls, making everything visible. In the first cell, a drunken vagabond was singing to himself. Further down, she heard the crack of whips and screams.

She passed a second cell, reeking of rotten food, where a naked man lay covered in filth, and then reached the chamber of interrogation and execution.

Her father was there.

She saw three of his officers whipping Titos. His back was raw and bleeding. The young man was deathly tired, yet the memory of the night with Peloponia gave him courage and hope that he might see her again, even if not in this world. He knew what awaited him — death was inevitable.

The father of the slain Korientus stood nearby, whip in hand, demanding vengeance. He only wanted it to end quickly.

The General had been sitting in the corner for an hour, head bowed, watching how Titos's body grew weaker under the lashes. Inside, he was torn apart. He knew the boy was good at heart and that everything had happened for love of his daughter. But he could not allow this young man to be the future of the being he loved with all his soul. So he wished the suffering would end soon.

Peloponia appeared just as the General was about to rise and stop the torture. She froze when she saw her beloved's body covered in blood. She felt sick, vomited, and fainted beside the bars.

Her father quickly unlocked the cell door and rushed to her side. He shook her gently, and when she opened her eyes, he saw hatred and fury within them.

"Don't kill him, Father! Please! He is the father of my child — your grandson! He only wanted to protect me, and you know it!"

At that moment, Titos screamed in agony. The executioner's whip had caught in his hair, tearing off part of his scalp. The father of Korientus wanted to end his vengeance quickly, yet still took pleasure in the boy's suffering.

The General could bear it no longer. He entered the cell again, drew his sword, and with one swift stroke, severed the head of the third officer — the father of Korientus. The other two officers froze in place, not daring to resist. The General threw his sword beside the dead man and said:

"Arrest me! Judge me! I am unworthy of this rank."

At that moment, loud cries echoed from the corridor. Something had clearly happened in the garrison — along with shouting came the clash of weapons.

To the officers' astonishment, it wasn't the guards who appeared, but half-drunk pirates storming through the halls, led by their commander — Captain Giacomo. He was so furious that he had forgotten to drop the severed head of a soldier; he still carried it in one hand, while in the other he brandished a sword with a gilded hilt.

One of the officers quickly locked the interrogation cell from the inside, slid the bolt into place, picked up the General's sword, handed it to him, and shouted:

"General, we'll fight these murderers to the last breath!"

The General froze, took the sword, and tried to assess the situation. But the first thing he saw was that his daughter was outside the cell — almost within Giacomo's reach. Quickly, he cut through the straps binding Titos, freed him, and handed him the sword of the officer he had slain, roaring:

"We fight to the end!"

Titos, half-dead, half-alive, took the sword in his trembling hands, stood on his feet, and suddenly a superhuman strength seemed to fill him. He pushed the officers so violently that they slammed against the walls. Then he moved to unbolt the cell door to go help Peloponia — but Giacomo had already reached her.

"One more move, and her head will lie next to this one!" shouted the pirate, pointing to the severed head rolling across the stone floor. "Drop your swords! I know who this girl is. And I know who you are... General! Yes, she's your daughter, isn't she?"

Titos and the General exchanged glances.

The father was the first to place his sword on the ground, and the girl's lover followed.

"Kill them!" Giacomo barked at his pirates, seizing the girl and dragging her toward the exit.

Peloponia resisted, but her strength was frail and fading. She even tried to gouge out the pirate's eyes, but he struck her so hard that she fell unconscious. He kept dragging her along, indifferent to whether she was alive or not.

The hand he held was delicate — yet something caught his attention. He noticed the ring on her finger. It was with that hand she had tried to wound him, and a glimmer of light had flashed in his eyes — but he had ignored it.

Giacomo stopped, tried to pull off the ring by force, but failed. Then he drew a sharp knife, cruelly cut off part of her finger, and tossed it aside, easily removing the ring.

Approaching the exit, splattered with the blood of the slain guards, Giacomo still dragged the girl unwillingly. But he wanted her as a captive — as his second wife, after Izura.

In his hand, he held the ring and felt warm waves washing over him — waves of madness.

Just then, the sun appeared, and he stopped. He set the girl against the wall near the heavy prison door. He opened his hand, and the ring shone brightly.

"Only the Master could have crafted such a ring," Giacomo thought, and continued reasoning: "But the Master is gone — I, Giacomo, killed him myself, and before that, I violated his wife before his very eyes. Then who? Only the 'Little Master' could have made such a fine piece. That means his son must be here — his true and only son, Titos. That young man beside the General, perhaps? There's