



Greed
is a deadly force

HURRICANE GOLD

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Part One:
EL HURACÁN



House Rules

There were thirteen men around the table. By the end of the day, one of them would be dead.

Two huge fans in the ceiling turned slowly, stirring the hot, damp air. No breeze came in through the row of open windows that looked out towards the bright blue waters of the Caribbean. A big storm was coming and there was a tense atmosphere. It was the sort of day that gave you a headache.

The men looked like they would all much rather have been somewhere else. A few of them were used to the heat, but most were sweating and uncomfortable. They tugged at their collars, fanned their faces, and pulled sticky shirts away from damp skin.

The man at the head of the table, though, seemed cool and relaxed. He sat perfectly still, staring at the others in silence, a glass of chilled fino sherry standing untouched at his elbow. He was well dressed in the style of a Mexican aristocrat, with an embroidered velvet suit and a frilly cream cravat at his throat held in place with a pearl stud.

He had a flat nose in the middle of a dark brown face that had the appearance of being carved out of old, hard wood. His thick mop of hair was pure white, as was his neat little Vandyke beard. He might have been forty, or he

might have been eighty, it was impossible to tell. His eyes looked like they had lived a thousand years and seen all there was to see.

At last he spoke, in English with a strong Mexican accent.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘we have a problem.’

‘What sort of a problem, El Huracán?’ asked a lean, handsome man with a mouth that was permanently set in a mocking smile. He was Robert King, a grifter from Chicago, who had married a wealthy widow, heiress to a diamond fortune, and pushed her from their yacht in the middle of the Atlantic. He had paid off the crew to keep their mouths shut and inherited all her wealth, but the skipper was a drunk and after one too many whiskies in a bar in Nantucket had blabbed the whole story.

The next day the police went looking for King.

King fled the country, but not before he had visited his ex-skipper in his cheap lodging house and quietly slit his throat with a razor.

He had come down here to hide out, his bags stuffed with banknotes and diamonds.

‘It is easily solved,’ said El Huracán. ‘But it is, nevertheless, a serious problem.’ He spoke quietly and sounded almost bored.

‘How serious?’ said King, taking a glass of cool water.

El Huracán stood up and walked to the nearest window, ignoring the question. He waited there, watching the distant waves breaking against the reef.

‘Tell me,’ he said at last, ‘is it not beautiful here on this island?’

There were mumbled yeses from around the table accompanied by the weary nodding of heads.

‘Is this not paradise?’

Again there were mumbled yeses.

El Huracán turned back from the window and looked round the tough faces of the men. 'So why would one of you wish to leave?'

There were a couple of grunts and mutterings, but nobody spoke up.

'Here on Lágrimas Negras we have the finest food,' said El Huracán, gesturing at the table, which was, indeed, piled high with dishes: thick steaks, chicken, grilled fish and lobster, sweet potatoes, rice, salad and tropical fruit.

'It is never cold. There is no disease. You never want for anything. Is that not true?'

'Very true, El Huracán . . .' said a fat, sunburnt man with yellow piggy eyes, his white shirt stained grey with sweat. His name was Dum-Dum White. He was a hold-up artist who had robbed a string of banks in the American Midwest with a tommy gun loaded with dumdum bullets. He had skipped south of the border when the rest of his gang had been killed in a shoot-out with FBI agents in Tucson.

'Here, you are all safe,' said El Huracán. 'You and the hundred or so other men and women who have come to my island.'

'That's right,' said Dum-Dum, who was melting in the heat.

'I know how you men hate authority.' The brown-skinned man chuckled. 'You live outside the law. But you accept that there must be a few rules.'

'Yes.'

'You *do* accept that?'

'Certainly. Without rules there'd be chaos,' said another American, Chunks Duhaine. Chunks was a hired killer

who had got his nickname from the condition in which he always left his victims.

‘You are all quite new here,’ said El Huracán, sitting down and taking a sip of sherry. ‘But by now you should have learnt my rules. What are they?’

‘First rule – you’re the boss,’ said a man with a wide, almost oriental face and a thin moustache. ‘What you say goes.’

This was Abrillo Chacon, a Chilean explosives expert who specialized in blowing banks open at night. In his last job, in Concepción, twelve policemen had been waiting for him, but Chacon had used so much explosives that the entire roof of the bank had fallen in, crushing them to death.

‘Correct,’ said El Huracán. ‘Every gang must have a boss.’

‘No problem. You’re a swell boss. You run a fine set-up here,’ said Chunks.

‘Thank you,’ said El Huracán. ‘It is always so nice to know that one is appreciated.’ He looked at the men, taking his time, enjoying their discomfort. ‘What are the other rules?’ he said eventually.

‘All our moneys is kept in you bank,’ said a skinny, pockmarked man. This was Aurelio de la Uz. One night Aurelio had followed a mafia gambler who had won a small fortune at a casino in Havana. He shot him through the back of the head, took his winnings and slipped away from Cuba a rich man.

‘Sí,’ said El Huracán, with a slight, elegant nod of his head. ‘If you had not come here, you men would be dead or in jail, and your money would be scattered to the wind. Instead you are all alive and happy and your money is well looked after.’

‘We ain’t got no choice,’ said Chunks Duhaine and he laughed mirthlessly.

‘If you will forgive me saying,’ said El Huracán, ‘on an island inhabited entirely by criminals, there might be a danger that one’s money was not safe. There are four bank robbers in this room alone. But no one will ever rob my bank, because if they did they would have a hundred of the most heartless killers in the world on their tail.’

‘Damned right,’ said Dum-Dum. ‘Though I must admit that bank of yours sure is one hell of a challenge.’

There was laughter from around the table, and El Huracán joined in before raising a hand for silence.

‘And what is the next rule?’ he said.

‘No communication with the outside world.’ This was said by Eugene Hamilton, a small, quiet man wearing spectacles, who had stolen nearly a million dollars from an oil company. He seemed out of place here among these thugs. He looked more like an accountant than an armed robber. This was because he *was* an accountant.

‘That is the most important rule of all, gentlemen,’ said El Huracán. ‘This is a unique place. An island where wanted men may hide out without fear of ever being captured. An island where their crimes do not matter. As long as you have the money to pay for it, you can live in paradise until the end of your days. But we do not want the outside world to know of our doings here. That is most important. So what is the *last* rule?’

‘Once we are here we can never leave,’ said Luis Chavez, a Mexican gangster.

‘I wonder how many of you men would have come here if you had known about this last rule?’ said El Huracán.

Once again nobody spoke out. El Huracán laughed.

‘This place must remain a secret, a legend, a dream,’ he said. ‘But somebody in this room has been trying to send letters . . .’

El Huracán stood up and began slowly to circle the table, walking behind the seated men.

‘Somebody here has tried to bribe one of my peons to take a message to the outside world. Somebody here wants to leave.’

El Huracán walked to the door and opened it. Two men walked in. They were Mexican Indians, rumoured to be from El Huracán’s village deep in the rainforest of the Chiapas in southern Mexico. They were dressed in the same simple white clothing that would have been worn by their ancestors two hundred years ago, but there was nothing primitive about the weapons they were carrying, German MP28 sub-machine guns.

‘What is this?’ said Robert King.

‘We do not want any unpleasantness,’ said El Huracán. ‘It might lead to indigestion after so lovely a meal.’ He then said something softly to one of his men, who handed him a small glass bottle containing a clear liquid.

‘What the hell’s that?’ said Chunks Duhaine. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘It is an antidote,’ said El Huracán. ‘You see, when I heard about how one of you was planning to betray me, I thought I would solve the problem quickly. I have poisoned his food. Soon he will begin to feel the effects. He will feel hot and dizzy. His throat will grow tight. He will sweat uncontrollably and terrible cramps and spasms will grip his stomach. Then his blood vessels will begin slowly to rupture and he will bleed inside, dark patches will appear on his skin. Within a few minutes he will be

dead. Unless, of course, I give him some of this antidote. I took this precaution simply because I knew the man would not voluntarily confess. But now, if he wants to live, he must come forward.'

El Huracán opened a wooden box and took out a syringe. He plunged the needle through the rubber stopper in the end of the bottle and extracted some of the liquid.

For a few moments nobody spoke. There was a terrible silence in the room. Then suddenly Robert King leapt to his feet, his handsome face distorted with fear. He was clutching his stomach and so much sweat was pouring off him it looked like he had just climbed out of a swimming pool.

'You damned snake,' he hissed. 'Give me that . . .'

'This?' said El Huracán innocently, holding up the bottle and the syringe. 'What for?'

'The antidote,' King gasped. 'Give me the antidote, you evil son of a —'

'Antidote?' said El Huracán as he stabbed the needle into a peach and pressed down on the plunger. 'What antidote?'

King looked on in horror. His breath was rasping in his throat as he held out a trembling finger towards the man standing calmly at the head of the table. 'You've murdered me, you swine . . .'

'I have done nothing of the sort, Mister King,' said El Huracán, taking a bite from the fruit. 'You have merely fallen for a cheap child's trick. There was no poison. It is only your own fear that makes you feel this way.'

There was a harsh snort of laughter from Dum-Dum, and Luis Chavez said something quickly in Spanish.

King looked round at the other men, trying to find a friendly face. Nobody would catch his eye.

‘I haven’t done anything,’ he said.

‘Then why on earth did you think you had been poisoned?’ said El Huracán. ‘Nobody else here jumped to their feet. Though I suspected all of you. That is why I invited you all for lunch. How gratifying to see that only one of you has been foolish.’

‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘You have confessed, Mister King. That is all I required.’ El Huracán nodded to his guards. ‘Take him away,’ he said, ‘and prepare *La Avenida de la Muerte* so that I can show the others what happens to anyone who is disloyal.’

‘What’s an *avenida de la muerte*?’ said Eugene Hamilton.

‘An avenue of death,’ said Luis Chavez, the Mexican gangster.

‘It is my rat run,’ said El Huracán with a grin.