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Opening extract from

# Hurricane Gold

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# 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 Lagrimas 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.




# The Avenue of Death

Robert King was sitting on a bench inside a windowless stone cell. The walls were scarred and scratched with messages and obscenities. He was not the first man to have been held captive here. Apart from the bench there was nothing else in the cell, one wall of which was taken up by a big dented metal gate. He heard a burst of muffled laughter from somewhere above. As far as he could tell he was underground. Some time soon that gate was going to open and he was going to walk out and face whatever challenge El Huracán had prepared for him.

He was ready.

He was a born optimist.

All his life he'd managed to get away safely. From the orphans' home, from the army, from his first two wives, from the police after he'd killed his third wife, the diamond heiress . . .

*All I got to do is stay alive*, he thought. *All I got to do is get to the end of the rat run.*

There was a sound behind him and he turned to see three men come into his cell through a low door. They were Mexican Indians, with long noses, wide mouths and mats of straight black hair framing their faces and hanging down to their shoulders.

Each carried a spear with a narrow blade at the end.

They said nothing. Just looked at him, unblinking. Patient. Waiting.

King swallowed. His throat was dry and his saliva felt sticky and thick in his mouth.

'Listen, guys,' he said. 'I'm a wealthy man. I don't know what Huracán pays you, but I can pay you more. Much more. I can make you very rich. *Mucho dollar. Sí?*' He rubbed his fingers together. 'Just stand aside and let me walk out of here. It's as simple as that. Just stand aside.'

The three Indians continued to stare silently at him.

Up above the cell, El Huracán was looking to the north-east where there was an angry black slash across the otherwise clear blue sky.

'Looks like a bad storm,' he said. 'Somebody is going to get soaked.'

'We could do with some of that rain down here,' said Chunks Duhaine, who was standing at his side. 'This weather is making me itchy. We need to clear the air.'

'I thought we *had* cleared the air,' said El Huracán with a sly smile.

Indeed, the atmosphere among the men collected along the top of the rat run was markedly lighter than it had been at lunchtime. They had all known that something was up, and were relieved that it hadn't meant trouble for *them*.

They were standing on a low, wide, square structure built of white stone. It was one of a handful of ancient Mayan ceremonial buildings in a part of Lagrimas Negras that was usually out of bounds to residents.

It was the base of a pyramid. It was here, centuries

before, that the Mayans had carried out their ritual sacrifices. But the pyramid had fallen into ruin and most of its huge stone blocks had been taken away to construct new buildings.

When El Huracán had come here he had cleared the base to reveal a long series of interlinked passageways. These he had opened up and turned into *La Avenida de la Muerte*, his avenue of death. It started in the remains of the pyramid and snaked its way out and across the ancient site towards a large sunken area where a second, smaller but more complete, pyramid stood.

'What's the score here?' asked Dum-Dum White, looking down into the alleyway at his feet and wiping his fat, red neck with a handkerchief.

'It is simple,' said El Huracán. 'When the gate is opened Señor King will attempt to reach the other end of the run. If he is not careful, or lucky, or fast enough, one of my traps will destroy him. The different gods mark the stations of his journey.'

He pointed to where images of Mayan deities had been painted on to the walls at various stages of the run.

'You must place bets on how far you think he will get before he is killed. So, choose your god of death, gentlemen.'

The men looked down into the rat run and at the sinister painted figures.

'There is Gucumatz,' said El Huracán. 'And Kinich Kakmo. Further along there is Balam-Agab, the night jaguar. Ixtab, with the rope around her neck, she is the goddess of suicides. The Mayans believed that if you committed suicide, you would go to heaven quicker. Many men, when they reach the marker of Ixtab, agree and take their own lives rather than face further pain. Señor King will be acting

out a Mayan myth: the descent into Xibalba, the realm of the dead, along a road full of treacherous obstacles.' He pointed towards the second pyramid. 'If he's lucky enough to reach the end, he will meet the final god, Hun Came. If he gets past him, he is free to go.'

'How many men have ever made it out?' said Dum-Dum.

El Huracán laughed. 'Only their ghosts get past Hun Came,' he said.

The men became excited, studying the dangers in the twisting alleyway below, discussing King's fitness and bravery, and noisily placing bets.

In his bleak cell beneath the pyramid, King could hear the sounds of merriment blotted out by a grinding noise as the metal gate slid up into the stonework. As it opened it revealed the long alleyway open to the sky, with walls some 15 feet high. He turned to the blank-faced Indian guards.

'Listen, guys –' he said, but his words were cut short as one of them jabbed him with the point of his spear. It was a practised move. The blade hardly penetrated his skin, but it stung like hell, and a thin trickle of blood began to flow down his chest. The other two raised their own spears and King backed away, arms raised.

'OK, OK,' he said. 'I get the message.'

He moved out into the sunlight. The Indians advanced and the gate slid shut behind them.

As King walked cautiously down the alleyway he noticed evidence of animals. There were droppings and bits of bones and dried-up scraps of meat. There was a cloying ammonia smell, trapped down here by the high walls.

He came to a corner and cautiously peered round it,

not knowing what he was going to find on the other side.

No signs of life. But the ground sloped downward into water and he realized that he would have to swim under a low arch in order to proceed.

The water was scummy and dark green and smelt awful. He could barely see 2 or 3 inches into its murky depths.

He forced himself onward, wading down the slope until the water was up to his chest. There was nothing for it now. He took a deep breath and ducked under the arch.

When he came up on the other side, coughing and spluttering, the disgusting water clogging his nose and ears, he opened his eyes to find six other pairs of eyes staring back at him.

They looked like they were floating on the surface of the water. Round and black and leathery, nothing else of the animals was visible, and, as King watched, they slowly began to move in closer.

He looked around quickly. He was in a half-submerged chamber. There was light at the far end, another arch like the one he had just come through. He splashed the water to keep the things away and in an instant they had disappeared under the water. He peered down but could see nothing in the murky gloom.

*Where had they gone?*

There was a sudden sharp pain in the back of his ankle as something latched on to his Achilles tendon. A second pain got him in the side, and as he put his hand down he felt a creature biting into the soft flesh at his waist.

He yelled.

'*Crocodylus Moreletii*,' said El Huracán. 'The Mexican crocodile. They are only babies, but their teeth are sharp

as needles. They don't like strangers swimming in their paddling pool.'

They heard another yell from below and seconds later King came blundering up the slope at the other end of the chamber, a small crocodile hanging from his side by its teeth. He shook it loose and it plopped into the water, gave a flick of its tail and swam away back into the chamber.

King was a sorry sight, standing there in his ruined shirt and trousers, dripping with filthy water and with a spreading pink stain across his stomach.

'Bravo!' said El Huracán, applauding. 'You have passed the sign of Chac, the god of rain. Not that I expected you to fall at the first fence. The crocs were just there to add a little bite to the proceedings!'

There was laughter from the watching men.

'Are you going to let him do this?' King shouted up at them. 'You all feel the same way as me, I know it. You all want out of here. Open your eyes! Are you going to let him get away with this? We're all prisoners here. We might just as well be in Alcatraz or San Quentin. He's bleeding us dry. He takes our money and then what? Ask him. Ask him what happens when your money runs out. Go on, ask him . . .'

'Carry on, please,' said El Huracán. 'There are more of my pets who are just dying to meet you.'

King spat, as much to show his contempt for El Huracán as to clear the foul water from his mouth.

'What if I just stay here?' he said bitterly. 'I don't reckon your three stooges are gonna want to follow me through there.'

'By all means stay if you like,' said El Huracán, and he laughed. 'Perhaps I can make it more comfortable for you?'

King, who was still standing in about 6 inches of water, suddenly sensed a movement beneath his feet and something punched upward from the stone floor. He cried out and jumped backwards. A spike had stabbed the sole of his left shoe and gone right through it into his foot.

He hopped and staggered along the alleyway as more rusty steel spikes began to shoot up all over the floor. He saw that it was studded with small holes and there was no way of knowing where the next spike would emerge.

The crowd of men following his progress found this hugely entertaining. They whistled and roared and screamed with laughter, forgetting that less than an hour ago King had been one of them.

King had to keep moving now or risk being stabbed again. As he stumbled along he left a trail of blood and water behind him.

Muttering curses under his breath, he tried to outrun the spikes, ignoring the pain that jolted up through his leg every time he put his injured foot down.

One spike grazed his ankle and another snagged his trousers; a third one went through the front of his right shoe. Miraculously, though, it somehow slid between his toes and caused no damage.

'Go on, King, you can do it,' someone shouted. 'You're nearly there.'

There were more cheers of encouragement from above. King knew that they didn't care about him at all; they just cared about their bets. Not one of them would have bet on him going down this early, but it was plain that if he fell over now, one of the spikes could kill him.

He made it to the end of that stretch of the run and was now faced by what appeared to be a solid wall. He

looked wildly around, hearing more spikes slicing up through the stones with the sound of knives being sharpened.

At last he spotted a narrow gap along the bottom of the wall, just wide enough to squeeze under. He threw himself on his belly, at any moment expecting to feel one of the spikes drive into him.

He wriggled forward, unable to see what was ahead of him. His hand touched something. It felt like dry twigs, but as he brushed them aside, he felt a nasty sting in his wrist.

From above, the watching men could see that King now had to get through a chamber filled with scorpions. He would have to crawl all the way, as horizontal steel bars prevented him from standing up.

The watchers followed King as he wriggled along, every now and then his body jerking as one of the scorpions got him with its tail. He would twist away each time, only to put himself within range of another one. Then he would squirm and writhe in the opposite direction.

'Ek Chuah,' said El Huracán, 'the Mayan scorpion god.'

King screamed. One of the creatures had got him in the cheek. He could feel his whole face swelling up. He moved more quickly. The nasty little bugs skittered and rattled around as he roared at them and vainly tried to protect himself from their stings.

The exit was only a few feet away. He concentrated on it, trying not to think about the terrible pain he was in.

He had been bitten in the heel and the belly, stabbed in the foot and now stung all over.

*What next?*

He soon found out. At the end of the scorpion chamber he was faced with a drop. He didn't hesitate. He just wanted

to get out of there fast. He flung himself over the edge and fell 6 feet. He was relieved to land on something soft.

His sense of relief was rather short-lived, however.

It was hard to decide which of the two was the more surprised: King, or the massive, sleeping anaconda.

As soon as King realized what he had landed on, he forgot all about his injuries and began scrabbling for a way out. For its part, the huge snake wrapped a length of its fat body around King's leg. It sensed that something was attacking it, and it was fighting back the only way it knew how.

'He has reached the sign of Gucumatz, the snake god,' said El Huracán as King grabbed hold of the top of the wall and tried to haul himself out. The great weight of the anaconda, which must have been a good 25 feet long, was pulling him back, though. He kicked out as it began to crush his leg. The coils slid further and further, up his shin, past his knee and along his thigh towards his groin.

'Get off me, you filthy brute,' King snarled and he pounded the animal against the stonework. He managed to hoist himself up on to the top of the wall, his lower half still dangling into the snake pit.

He shook his trapped leg and felt a slight lessening of the grip, and then, with an almost inhuman effort, he wrenched it free.

The snake had to be satisfied with his shoe, which it proceeded to mangle in its coils. The shoe had been handmade in Italy and cost more than the average Mexican peasant would earn in a month.

King didn't stay around to watch, though. He struggled to his feet, and then winced from a fresh pain as he tried to walk.

He had twisted his ankle trying to get it away from the snake, which now meant that neither of his legs was much use to him.

He yelled every foul insult he could think of up at El Huracán, who was busy taking money off those men who had lost bets so far.

'You'd better hotfoot it to the other end, Señor King,' El Huracán called down to him. 'Because when you see what I have cooked up for you next, you are not going to want to stay for dinner.'

'What are you talking about, you reptile?'

King looked around him, trying to work out where the next threat would come from.

The floor of this section of the rat run was made entirely of riveted iron plates. The sun was burning down and had heated up the metalwork. King could feel it through his sock.

*Well, at least there wouldn't be any animals around. It would be too uncomfortable for them here.*

King hobbled forward, the floor seeming to get hotter with every step.

He spotted a series of vents along one side of the alley. Smoke was seeping out.

And then he understood.

The floor wasn't just getting hotter from the heat of the sun.

There was a fire down below.

El Huracán's men were deliberately heating the iron plates. If he didn't get out of there fast he was going to be fried like a shrimp on a griddle pan.

But moving quickly wasn't possible with a badly cut foot and a twisted ankle; he could only shuffle along

like one of the walking wounded from a battle.

Soon the heat had burnt through his sock and there was nothing to protect the skin of his foot. He tried to run, but only managed five steps before he stumbled. He put out his hands to break his fall and, as they pressed against the red-hot metal, he screamed in agony. When he tried to pull them away they were stuck fast. He gritted his teeth and pulled hard, leaving two grey handprints of flayed skin behind.

Somehow he got to his feet again and staggered on, the smell of cooking meat filling the air.

He wondered what sort of twisted mind could dream up such a place. What sort of mind could take pleasure in the pain and suffering of others? But he knew the answer. A mind like his own. A mind like all the men on this island possessed.

A heartless, criminal mind.

He was delirious with pain now, his vision blurring, his heart racing, his breath scalding his lungs. The heat was so intense it burnt the sole off his remaining shoe and through the sock. Both of his feet were now naked and each step was a fresh agony.

He just made it to the end of the hot plates before he passed out, and flung himself into the water-filled trench that divided this section of the rat run from the next.

The water felt deliciously cooling, and for a moment he didn't care what creatures might be lurking in it.

'Congratulations, Señor King, you have made it as far as Kinich Kakmo, the sun god. You are nearly halfway. But I wouldn't stay too long in your bath, that water is teeming with leeches.'

King floundered across the trench and flopped on to

the other side. He saw an ugly black leech attached to the back of one hand, but he ignored it. Compared to what he had been through, a leech was nothing to worry about.

'Who has bet that he would get no further than Balam-Agab, the night jaguar?' asked El Huracán and several men nodded.

'Few men get further than this,' said El Huracán, his black eyes shining.

Even as he said it a door slid open in one wall and a deep animal growl came out from the chamber behind it.

King added a long sad moan of his own and managed somehow to stand up. His legs were like lead weights, but he forced one aching foot in front of the other, plodding along like a ninety-year-old man.

He heard a movement and glanced back to see exactly what he had been expecting to see: a big black cat, sleek and hungry-looking, its yellow eyes fixed on him. It was creeping forward in a low hunter's crouch.

King glanced ahead, his senses sharpened by fear. The door at the other end of the alley didn't look too far away.

But what was the point? What was the damned point? On the other side of the door would be something else, something worse.

The will to live is powerful, though. No matter what terror awaits, no matter what fresh torture, if there is a slim chance of life, of escape, most men will reach for it.

'You can do it,' King mumbled through cracked lips. 'All you got to do is get to the end, you can do it . . . Go on . . . Run!'

Miraculously he was running. His legs pounding on the hard stone. Maybe the jaguar was behind him, maybe even

now it was getting ready to jump on his back and sink its teeth into his neck . . .

Then suddenly he was no longer running. He couldn't move. He couldn't feel any part of his body. The pain had all gone. He could hear the steady drip of blood.

Strung taut across the alleyway were thin strands of narrow flattened wire, their edges razor sharp. Distracted by the jaguar, King had run straight into them.

One wire was at the height of his neck, another at his stomach, one more at his thighs. He stood there, held up by the wires buried deep in his body; twitching, growing cold, as the life drained out of him.

The men above watched in silence as King slowly stopped moving. They held their breath as the jaguar crept up to him and delicately pulled him off the wires with its claws. Then it began to drag him back to its lair.

It was all over. In the end death had come fast and King had got less than halfway through the rat run.

These were tough men; they had all seen some terrible things in their time. Most had tasted their fill of blood, and smelt its rusty stench. Most were killers.

None of them had ever seen a show like this before, though, and they were left stunned and awed and just a little unsettled.

What had they become? What were they turning into on this beautiful island in the Caribbean?

'Gentlemen,' said El Huracán, cheerfully clapping his hands together, 'let us settle our bets and then I would like to invite you all for cocktails on my terrace, where we can watch the sun set.'

Eton College
Windsor
England

My dear James,

The weather here is as grim as usual. Just look at me! I have been in England too long. I have become English. Unable to talk about anything except the weather. But, dammit all, an English winter is a terrible thing and I do not think that I shall ever get used to it. I am more jealous of you being in Mexico than you can imagine. I went home to India at Christmas after our adventures and it was lovely to see blue skies and sunshine and bright colours again, and to eat some decent sock.

After the excitements of the last half it is all back to normal here at Codrose's. The food is as awful as ever and Codrose is as bad-tempered as ever. Actually, if anything, he is even worse (if that is possible) since the fire and the break-in. The building still smells of smoke. Katey the maid never really recovered from the shock of bumping into the intruder, and she has left. Joy of joys she has been replaced, not with another old crocodile but with a young Irish girl called Roan. She is

rumoured to be only seventeen and everyone is in love with her. Even me. And I have never really seen the point of girls before. The thing is, you can talk to her as a friend. I am sure you will like her.

Actually, I say things are back to normal, but they are not. The new Librarians are a bunch of pirates. There was too much going on last half for us to really notice, but now that you are not around and things have quietened down, it has become clear that the boys in charge of Codrose's are the most bloodthirsty, uncaring gang that the House has ever had to put up with. They lord it about the place like a bunch of little Mussolinis. The worst of them all is Theo Bentinck. He has beaten so many of us, often for no reason at all, that he has been nicknamed Bloody Bentinck (although some boys call him worse). He seems determined to make our lives a thorough misery. I feel if you were here to stick up for us lower boys things might be a little different, as it is we are all timid and scared of our own shadows. We stay in our rooms and keep the noise down and try not to be noticed. Hurry back, please. We need our James.

Our sporting achievements have been pretty dismal this half. Despite Theo Bentinck threatening to beat everyone if they don't win, the lower boys in the House have been lost without you. Everyone has been lost without you. I saw your

friend Perry Mandeville the other day, and he said that even the Danger Society has been quiet. He said they have started work on restoring your Bentley, though. I think they had some foolish idea that they might have it ready for your return, but I do not think this will happen. Perry seems to like talking about things more than actually doing them. By the way, he has been going about the place showing off and bragging about his involvement in the Fairburn incident and your part in it has almost been forgotten. (Knowing you, though, I think that is how you would want it. You always hate getting too much attention.)

In short, we all miss you and look forward to your return. I fear that you are the only one who can sort out the gang of mobsters who have taken over Codrose Library. So please try not to get involved in any more adventures while you are away. Get plenty of rest as you will need to be fit and well when you return. We want you back in one piece not missing any arms or legs, or wearing an eyepatch like Lord Nelson!

I will write soon with more news.

Yours,

Pritpal S. Mandra