

El Rey Sol
By
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Jay Cassio took a sip of his drink and looked around. He and Dan Del Colliano, his life long friend, were sitting near the corner of the pool bar at the Buena Vista, a fishing camp located twenty or so miles northeast of Cabo San Lucas on Baja California's southern coast. They had a direct view to a nearby table where two men were playing gin while a group of four or five others stood around watching and drinking. Two of the men watching were captains from the camp's small fleet that Jay remembered seeing at the dock that morning when guests were shaping up to board their respective boats. One had an eye patch and a thick black mustache. Jay also recognized one of the card players, a barrel-chested American who he saw at the scale in the afternoon getting his picture taken with two sailfish he had caught today.

"The Texan's killing that guy," said Dan, who Jay knew had been watching the game with more than casual interest.

"How do you know he's a Texan?"

"I heard him talking about himself at dinner. Big shot."

"I take it he's rubbing you the wrong way."

Dan did not answer, just stared over at the Texan.

"Why?" Jay asked.

"He's the guy who ran over our lines. Boat seven."

Jay and Dan had arrived at the camp late last night. This morning they had gotten up early to fish and were assigned boat eleven. They trolled baitfish all morning over a two-square-mile area but got no hits. At noon they

were eating sandwiches when they spotted a boat about two hundred yards away steaming across their stern. A moment later the boat slowed and turned away from them and a moment after that a sailfish broke the surface in spectacular fashion, shimmering blue-gray in the sunlight and spraying water in all directions as it leaped to rid itself of the hook embedded in its mouth.

"You saw him?"

"With my binoculars."

"Leave it, Dan."

"That was our sailfish."

"The captain did it."

"I doubt it."

Jay did not care that they had caught nothing today. It did not bother him that the burley Texan with the thinning reddish-blond hair and thick forearms had crossed their lines and caught their sailfish. But he knew his friend Danny. He was never quite happy unless he was connected to some trouble brewing somewhere; preferably in a pot he was stirring himself.

The night before they left for Cabo, Dan, newly divorced, had driven to his ex-wife's boyfriend's condo complex, stood on the roof of the guy's Mercedes coupe, and pissed on the windshield. To help pay off his debt to a nasty loan shark, Dan, a private investigator, had recently dumped a client's car in a North Jersey lake, guarantying it would never be found, in return for ten percent of the insurance proceeds. Just a week ago he had gotten into it in the stands at his son's peewee basketball game with the obnoxious father of a boy on the other team. Jay had intervened before any punches were thrown, which was fortunate for the other father, because Dan, a small but

stocky guy with no fear and hammers for fists, could do a lot of damage in a few blazing seconds, something Jay had witnessed several times, the first when they were eleven years old.

At the card table, the Texan's opponent, a dentist from California who had sat with Jay and Dan at breakfast, was giving the universal surrender signal, hands up, palms forward.

"Anybody else interested in a game?" the Texan boomed, looking casually around the room, grinning, settling his eyes finally on Jay and Dan. "You guys? I hear Jersey guys love to gamble."

"How do you know we're from Jersey?" Jay asked. The Texan's table was only ten feet away. The dentist was still in his seat.

"My dentist friend here," was the reply.

"How much did you lose?" Danny asked the dentist, who was putting a five and a one-dollar bill in his wallet and getting to his feet.

"Two hundred," he answered. "The guy's lucky."

"I'll tell you what," said Dan, looking at the Texan, "I'll cut you for the two hundred you won off this guy. One time, no doubling down."

"You serious?" the Texan answered.

"Yep. We'll see how lucky you really are."

"You're not saying I was cheating are you?"

"I wasn't watching."

The Texan did not reply. Keeping his eyes on Danny, he rose, took a bulging money clip out of the front pocket of his cargo shorts, peeled off ten twenties and placed them in the middle of the scarred wooden table. "Let's see yours," he said.

"You don't think I'm good for it?" Dan said. He had put his hands on the bar's ledge and was leaning toward the Texan's table. The onlookers began to back away, making room for whatever was going to happen, a fight perhaps, or Dan walking over and sitting down.

"I have it," Jay said, taking two hundred dollars out of his wallet, stepping over to the table and placing it next to the Texan's cash. "I'm Jay Cassio," Jay said, extending his hand to the Texan, "and you are?"

"Paul Richards, pleased to meet you." Jay, at six-three, two hundred pounds and very much still in his prime at thirty-five, matched Richards' extra-firm hand pressure before cutting the handshake off. "I guess your friend is serious," Richards continued.

"He is."

"Is he saying I was cheating?"

You're protesting too much, Jay thought, but said, "How could he form an opinion if he wasn't watching the game?"

"Are we playing?" Dan asked. He had also stepped over and was standing next to Jay. Six inches shorter than Jay, Dan was about the height of Richards, whose gut was ponderous under his barrel chest, and whose large-knuckled hands hung like dead weights at the end of long, thick arms. Jay calculated that the Texan had at least forty pounds on Dan. He looked to be about fifty, but still very strong, his body and self-confidence the kind that years of blue water fishing will produce. Despite all this, Jay was not worried about Danny, only about the numbers around the table.

A wind kicked up off the sea, only fifty yards away, shaking the paper lantern that hung over the table, causing shadows to dance across the faces of the three men facing

each other and the small group that had tightened again around them.

Richards eyed Danny, then pushed the deck of cards across the table.

"Let's get a new deck," Dan said.

"You got a lot of balls, kid," said Richards. One of the onlookers, the captain with the eye patch, went over to the bar and was handed an unopened deck by the bartender, who had been watching. The captain scraped the cellophane off the box with a swipe of a large grizzled thumb, slipped the deck out and handed it to Richards, who shuffled it professionally and set it down on the table next to the cash. "Go ahead," he said, looking at Dan.

"I'm the challenger," Dan said. "I go last."

Richards hesitated for a moment, eyeing Dan across the table. Jay couldn't tell if the gleam in the Texan's eye and the slight upward curl of his lips were signs of anger or bemusement. There was no doubt about his self assurance though, no doubt that he was certain he could easily handle the small, cocky New Jerseyite standing across from him if it were to come to that. Jay had known several people to make the same mistake in their judgment of his friend, or of their own abilities.

"Sure," Richards said, reaching unhurriedly to the cards, lifting about half the deck away and revealing a king. "Do you think that was cheating?" he said, smiling, flipping the card on to the table where it landed face up close to Dan's right hand.

"I never said you were cheating," Dan replied.

"Not in so many words."

Dan was grinning now—a grin that was likely confusing to Richards because it was open to two interpretations, one

happy, the other malicious. Jay was not confused. Having seen this grin many times before, he knew that his friend's thoughts were both happy *and* malicious.

"Fuck it," said Dan. He picked up a little more than half the deck and turned over an ace. "I'll give half of this to our captain to replace the fish you stole from us today," he said, still smiling that confusing smile, pulling the cash toward him.

Jay kept an eye on the onlookers. He thought the captain who had gotten the fresh cards was Richards' captain and that he might not take kindly to the word *stole*. This man, looking more Indian than Mexican, was watching the Texan carefully, his good eye a glinting black coal in an otherwise expressionless, weather-beaten face. The rest of the men were still, quiet, looking from the Texan to Danny, back and forth, waiting, perhaps hoping.

"Fuck-all," said Richards. "Is that was this is about? Your captain was in my water. I told him we'd be heading there around lunch time."

"You own the water out there?" Danny said.

"No, but I've been coming here for twenty years. People usually get my drift."

"You mean follow your orders."

"You are a piece of fucking work," said Richards, who was smiling and shaking his head, "but you know what?"

"What?"

"I don't think it's an act."

"It's not."

"I bet you think you could kick my ass."

"I can."

"Fuck all. Let me buy you a drink."

"Sure."

"You got balls. I thought you were a fake gangster."

"We're all gangsters up in Jersey," Dan said, "just like all you Texans are ten gallon hats full of shit." Dan was grinning widely now, his dark eyes laughing. And why not? Jay thought. He had called the Texan a cheat and a thief, taken his money and gotten him to buy drinks, all in five minutes, smiling that crazy smile the whole time.

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Jay picked up his book, and settled back in his lounge chair. He had been staring at the Sea of Cortez—a deep sparkling blue as it took the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun—and thinking of a different ocean. Before heading to Mexico, he and Dan had flown to San Francisco, where they visited the stone memorial on Mount Tam to the 138 passengers, Jay's parents among them, killed ten years ago in a plane that crashed into the Pacific on its approach to SFO. He had not wanted to go, but Danny had insisted. *It's ten years, he had said, you have to go.* He was right, of course. And the truth is, it was good for him. Touching the inscribed stone marker and gazing at the sea, vast and green, his parents' watery grave, had brought tears to his eyes and a flood of memories; memories, he realized, he did not want to fade or die.

Before he could start reading, two shadows appeared across his legs. When he looked up he saw that they were cast by Paul Richards and a waiter carrying a tray of margaritas.

"I think the way we left off, it was my turn to buy." said Richards, pulling a chair up to face Jay and Dan, who was in a lounge chair next to him. The Texan sat and motioned to the waiter to set the drinks down. Richards' bright tropical shirt and flashing teeth were muted by

Jay's sunglasses, but there was no way of diminishing his booming voice or the forceful presence of his burly body, freckled and tanned and covered with a layer of fine red hair turned blonde by the sun. Jay and Dan thanked him and all three picked up their margaritas.

"What the hell," said Dan, taking a long sip.

"How'd you guys do today?" Richards asked when he put his glass down, now half empty.

"Skunked again," said Dan, "You?"

"One sailfish, hundred twenty or thereabouts. Couple of dolphin fish. What boat were you on?"

"Number eleven again," Jay answered.

"Where'd he take you?"

"Fuck if we know," said Dan. "Who's a good captain?"

"Try to get boat six, Captain Alex. I used him for a couple of years. He's a straight shooter, and he's been going out there a long time."

Last night, the hatchet—if there was one—buried, Richards told Jay and Dan big fish stories, including one about a thousand pound marlin that he had fought for six hours, and that dragged his boat down to Cabo—about thirty miles—before he had to cut it loose. He had been coming to the Buena Vista for twenty years, and it was obvious he had the local scene, both on the land and on the water, down cold. He was still knocking back pina coladas when they went off to bed at midnight.

"You guys sleep O.K.?" Richards asked.

"Sure. Why?" said Jay.

"There was a ruckus. One of the captain's came over from La Perla—the next camp up the coast—he said we were all over his water yesterday, blaming me."

"What happened?"

"I tossed him out on his ass."

"We heard nothing."

"The thing is, we did get close to where he had his lines out, but hell, it's one of my favorite spots."

"Is that where you caught the second sailfish?" Dan asked.

"We moved over a bit, but pretty near."

"Who's your captain?"

"Ernesto—*El Tiburon* they call him. The Shark."

"With the eye patch."

"That's him."

"What did he say?"

"He does what I tell him to do. I've been coming here so long, I know the waters better than him. Plus, I let him and his crew keep everything I catch, and I tip them well, in U.S. dollars."

The rituals of deep water fishing had evolved as a way of self-regulating a sport that was practiced by people—mostly men—who were tough, aggressive, usually rich, and highly protective of their prerogatives. Jay knew that most commercial captains took these rules seriously—there was no profit in having a reputation as a renegade. He was therefore surprised to hear that Richards' captain had violated a cardinal rule—coming too close to another boat's lines—for a few dollars. This must have registered on his face, because Richards held his eyes for a second, then, smiling broadly, said, "I suppose I owe him an apology though. I guess a few dollars wouldn't hurt either."

"He probably feels that sailfish was his," said Dan.

"Could be," said Richards, downing his drink.

Though his face was lined with age and deeply burnished by years under the tropical sun, there was still a country boy look and feel about Richards: *shucks fella, up the road a piece* and *straight shooter* were pretty clearly part of an ingrained and seemingly ingenuous style. This veneer of innocence was especially evident when he flashed his disarmingly sunny smile, as he did again now. But Jay did not miss the slight narrowing of the Texan's eyes as he absorbed Dan's comment.

"How long are you guys staying?" Richards asked.

"A week," said Jay.

"Good. Let's have dinner one night. I know a great steak house just up the road a piece. El Rey Sol."

Jay and Dan decided to stay with Captain Alfonso, who was pleasant enough and seemed competent. Over the next two days, they caught only a few dolphin fish, which they threw back, but the next day, their fifth at the camp, they got lucky. Dan struggled for two hours with a three hundred pound marlin before getting it to the side of the boat where the crew gaffed it and hauled it over the rail; and Jay boarded a beautiful sailfish after a forty-five minute fight.

When they got back to the camp, after the obligatory pictures at the scale, they looked for Paul Richards, thinking to invite him to El Rey Sol to help them celebrate their successful day. Richards had bought them drinks, by the pool and after dinner at the outdoor bar, each of the last two days, and they were looking forward to repaying him and to telling him a fish story of their own. But Richards was not to be found, and so, after swimming and sleeping and showering, with a strawberry daiquiri or two thrown in—their usual rough day at the Buena Vista—they

headed for the steak house on their own at around eight P.M.

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Baja California is basically a desert surrounded by ocean. Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, located a few miles from each other at the southern tip of the peninsula, once simple fishing villages, were now encrusted with the barnacles of North American popular culture: the golden arches, neon ten gallon hats, cabana clubs, go-go bars and so on. To the west and north of the towns however, the desert—arid, rocky, starkly beautiful—reigned in the same hot and silent splendor as it had for many thousands of years.

It was at the edge of this desert, on a dusty ocean road about twenty miles north of San Jose, that the Buena Vista lay, the first of three fishing camps dotting an otherwise desolate coast. The next camp, La Perla, was thirty miles north. The Sun King—El Rey Sol—was situated between the two. Across the street, on the sea side, two forlorn looking locals were sitting in the fading daylight on the crumbling concrete steps of a primitive bodega with a gas pump out front—the first sign of civilization Jay and Dan saw on the twenty mile trip along the coast road from the Buena Vista in their rented Volkswagen Beetle. Dan, riding shotgun, waved to them as they made the left turn into the restaurant's gravel driveway. They parked on hardpan between a battered pickup and another Beetle.

Over the front door of El Rey Sol was a tile mosaic of a yellow, many-rayed sun with a wry smile on its face: it had seen all there was to see of man's sorry stay on the planet, and was not expecting the future to be any better. Inside there were six tables covered with white table

cloths and set simply with white cotton napkins and neatly arranged silverware. Spanish guitar music was coming from a transistor radio on a wall shelf. The place was empty except for a young couple at the bar and three men at a table in the middle of the room: Paul Richards, Captain Ernesto—the Shark—and a third man unknown to Jay and Dan. Except for the patch, the third man was a near replica of the Shark: dark, swarthy, in his forties, deep-set black eyes in a grizzled, mustached, sun-baked face. There was a bottle of Tequila and a bowl of salt on the table. The three seemed to be in deep conversation.

Jay and Dan nodded hello to Richards, and he nodded back and lifted his glass. They took a table near the back, where they ate salad and perfectly grilled steaks and drank scotch for a leisurely two hours. With their coffee came cordials sent by Richards. When they finished their cordials, it was close to eleven o'clock, and the place was empty except for Richards' table. They thanked him across the room, smoked a cigarette each and left.

About halfway back to the Buena Vista, Jay, patting his shirt pocket out of habit, discovered that he had left his cigarette case on the table at the restaurant. He immediately swung the car around and headed back. A full moon hung over the sea, dramatically illuminating the two-lane road and the long stretches of rocky beach it paralleled, but Jay, intent on getting back to El Rey Sol before it closed, took no notice. The simple eighteen-carat gold case, inscribed on the back, *A.J.C./C.R.C./6/21/59*, had been a wedding gift from his mother to his father. A sporadic smoker, he had nevertheless carried it with him everywhere for the past ten years.

The aborted trip home and back took no more than a half hour, but The Sun King was dark when Jay turned into the small parking lot. The dust-covered pickup was still there, the other Beetle gone. He parked next to the truck, gripped the handle of the driver's door, and was about to open it when Dan, who had been silent the entire way back, placed his hand on Jay's right shoulder, and said, "Hold on. Did you hear something?"

"No," Jay answered. "What?"

"Music? Voices? Listen."

Jay took a deep breath and looked at Dan, whose black eyes were glowing with concentration in the dark interior of the car. Jay listened, picking small sounds out of the silence of the night: a flag whipping on the roof of the now-shuttered bodega, the wind whispering in some nearby scrub cypress; no music, no voices; but then a distinct grunt, and the sound of a door swinging shut.

"Good," he said. "There's somebody in there."

"Why are the all the lights off?" The pressure of Dan's hand on Jay's shoulder increased slightly as he said this. "I didn't like the looks of those two guys with Richards," Dan continued. "You had your back to them. I had a clear view all night. There was some shit going down at that table."

Jay sat back in his seat, and stared across the parking lot toward the front door of the restaurant.

"It's nothing, Dan," he said, "I'm going in."

"Let's go around back."

"Fine."

They exited the car and headed toward the squat, one story building. As he passed the pickup, Dan pulled out his fishing knife, bent down, and slashed deeply into the front

right tire. Jay shook his head, but then thought twice: having caused so much of it, Dan could smell trouble where most people had no clue.

"You go that way," said Dan, putting away his knife, and gesturing toward the left. "We'll meet in back."

Jay made his way to the back left corner of the restaurant, stepping softly, staying close to the side of the building, then stopped before turning into the rear yard, to listen and get his bearings. There was silence, and then a distinct cracking sound—metal ratcheting against metal. Jay turned the corner and saw in the silvery moonlight el Tiburon aiming a shotgun at Paul Richards, who was laying on his side on the ground, propped on an elbow, holding his forehead, which was gashed and bleeding. The other Mexican was between Jay and el Tiburon, looking at the ground, searching intently for something.

The Shark lifted the shotgun as if to fire, but then turned abruptly to his partner and said something in Spanish. He seemed annoyed. As he turned back to take aim once again, Dan slammed into him head first at full speed, sending them both sprawling. As they collided, the rifle fired, then flew through the air as if thrown, landing near the second Mexican, who stood still for a second staring in disbelief at Dan and the Shark rolling in the dirt and weeds that covered the rear yard. Spotting the rifle, he stepped to retrieve it, but Jay, already in motion, reached it first, grabbing it by the barrel and swinging it butt first into the man's hip, causing him to cry out in pain and collapse to the ground. Thinking he might still be a threat, Jay whacked the shotgun's butt against the side of his head, then, breathing heavily, still holding the gun, turned his attention to Dan and the Shark. Both were lying

face down. The captain was bleeding from a gash on the back of his head. Dropping the shotgun, Jay went to Dan and knelt beside him. He heard Richards grunt and turned to watch him slowly lift himself to his feet. The second Mexican was moaning but inert.

"Dan," Jay said, not touching his friend, making it a point not to. "Dan."

Nothing.

"Fuck all," said Richards.

"Danny," Jay said, taking his friend by the shoulder, but thinking, *don't do it, don't turn him over.*

Before Jay could take his hand away, or exert more pressure, Danny rolled onto his side, and then his back. He was smiling. There was a blood-covered rock the size of a softball in his hand. "I guess I got the wind knocked out of me," he said.

Jay shook his head, then extended a hand to help Dan up.

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Dan toed the Shark over onto his back, bent down and placed his ear to his mouth. "He's breathing," he said, straightening up, "but his skull's probably broken. Let's check out the moaner."

The moaner had stopped moaning, and lay on his back, sweating, half conscious. Jay had heard his hip crack sharply when he hit him with the shotgun. The blow to the head was probably a blessing.

"He's out," said Richards.

"What happened?" Dan asked.

"Robbery."

"Murder too, if we didn't show up," said Jay. "Who's the other guy?"

"The captain from La Perla."

"I guess they had enough of your bullshit," said Dan.

The two stared at each other for a long second or two.

"They probably did at that," Richards said, finally. He was looking at Danny intently, as if seeing something in him he hadn't noticed before. Something, perhaps, to be feared. "Now I think we should clear out," he continued, "and by that I mean all the way to the states. These boys will not be happy when they come to, they'll want justice, their way."

"They won't be themselves for quite a while," said Dan.

"If ever," said Jay. They followed his gaze to the men on the ground. The Shark was still out cold. His partner was awake now and propped on an elbow, staring at them. Danny started to approach him and as he did the man used his arms to try to drag himself away, but immediately screamed in pain and fainted.

Danny found the shotgun and whacked it against a small boulder not far away, breaking it apart at its hinge. He threw the broken pieces into the high weeds at back of the yard.

"What about your head?" Jay said to Richards.

"I know a doc in Cabo," Richards answered, "a guy I fish with. He'll take care of it. Then we'll head for the airport. There's a flight every morning at seven for L.A. It's on me, by the way. Your hotel bill too. We'll quick stop there on the way to Cabo."

"What about the police?"

The Texan smiled. "These men won't call the police," he said. "They don't have enough money to pay them to do their job. Trust me. This is Mexico."

"I have to go inside first," said Jay. "We came back for something. I need to look for it."

"A gold cigarette case?"

"Yes."

"This asshole with the broken hip stole it, then he dropped it when they shoved me outside. He was looking around for it when el Tiburon was getting ready to kill me, which must have been the good Lord at work, giving little Dan here the chance to save my life."

"What happened to the staff?"

"These two chased them home as soon as you left, which is when I knew I had a problem."

"Here it is," said Dan, leaning over and picking the cigarette case up off the ground near the scene of Jay's run-in with the moaner. He handed it to Jay, who turned it over and read the inscription before putting it into the pocket of his khaki shorts.

"I guess that thing saved my life," said Richards. "It must be pretty special."

Jay did not answer. He was fingering the cigarette case in his pocket, rubbing his thumb across the inscription. He looked over at Danny, who was smiling that crazy smile, who for a couple of seconds Jay thought was dead. Danny, he thought, Danny...

"It's nothing," he said, finally. "Let's go."