

## Chapter 10

Jake pulled his patrol car into a valet parking space outside the La Valencia Hotel on Prospect Street, opened the door and climbed out. La Valencia was the center of the social scene in La Jolla, a six-story edifice that breathed old money and generational entitlement, the grand matron of La Jolla hospitality, situated on a rise above Cove Park and the rocky beaches below. Movie stars looking for peace and privacy didn't book rooms at the La Valencia, especially during the summer. There were too many tourists in town during the day and too many parties at night.

La Jolla residents used the amenities for weddings, tea socials, after-theater celebrations, and debutante balls. The hotel's restaurants featured al fresco dining, where clientele consumed lobster and asparagus salads surrounded by terra-cotta gardens of dark green succulents beneath swaying palm trees. Tendrils of purple bougainvillea scaled the arched columns on the terrace and spread across the Spanish-style tiled roof. The exterior of the building had recently been painted Pepto-Bismol pink, which local wits joked was to settle the stomachs of lushes leaving the bar. The police substation was only a block away, on the other side of the street.

"I'll just be a couple of minutes," Jake said to the valet who stepped out to greet him. The valet nodded and returned to his station. Jake walked up the sidewalk, turned in at the Saltillo-tiled patio, and entered the lobby. The night clerk stood at the reception desk, sorting through papers.

"Good evening, officer," said the clerk. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone named Nicky Hilton," Jake said. "I've been told he's a guest

here.”

“Let me check,” said the clerk. He opened a drawer and flipped through a stack of registration receipts, found the one he wanted. “Yes. Mr. Hilton is still registered with us. I can have the operator put you through to his room, if you’d like. Just use the phone over there.”

The night clerk indicated a curved vestibule where a black phone sat on a circular side table. Jake crossed the lobby, picked up the receiver, heard the desk clerk speak to the operator.

“Guest lobby to Suite 501 please, Agnes,” said the clerk. Jake waited as the operator connected. A phone rang at the other end of the line. It continued to ring—four, five, six times. After the seventh ring, the operator disconnected the line.

“Your party doesn’t appear to be in,” she said. “Would you like to leave a message?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “Tell him that officer ... never mind. I’ll try later.”

Jake hung up the phone. If Hilton had stolen the necklace, a message from a police officer would only tip him off. He returned to the reception desk.

“Did you reach Mr. Hilton?” said the night clerk.

“No,” Jake said. “He’s not in.”

“I’m not surprised,” said the clerk. “Mr. Hilton is quite the night owl. He often doesn’t come back until four or five in the morning.”

“Where does he go?”

The desk clerk gave Jake a tight smile.

“I couldn’t say, sir. We don’t keep tabs on our guests.”

“No, of course not,” Jake said. “Have you seen Mr. Hilton tonight? Did you see him go out?”

The clerk looked thoughtful, as if trying to remember if he’d seen Hilton, or perhaps

deciding what to say if he had.

“I haven’t seen him tonight, but you might enquire at the valet station. That’s where taxis pick up our guests. The valet may have seen him.”

“Thank you,” Jake said, scribbling notes. “Anything else you can tell me about Mr. Hilton? How long is he planning to stay?”

The night clerk checked the registration card.

“It’s listed as an open-ended stay on the card, sir. There’s no checkout date.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Not really,” said the clerk. “Many of our summer guests do the same. The regulars, anyway. You might check next door in the lounge.”

Jake pointed his pencil toward the front door.

“The Whaling Bar?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk. “Mr. Hilton is a regular there.”

“Thank you,” Jake said. He closed his notebook, put it back in his pocket and headed toward the street. The Whaling Bar was the liveliest and most public wing of the hotel, a dark, leathery den of alcoholic fraternization patronized by La Jolla residents as well as hotel guests. A large painting hung on the back wall, a room-length rendering of whales, ships, and harpooners that wouldn’t have been out of place in a drab New England pub but seemed at odds with the hotel’s sunny frippery.

Jake turned in at the side entrance. The room was noisy and crowded. He heard someone call his name, turned to look for the voice. A man waved at him from a back corner table. Max Miller, the writer from the diner. Jake made his way over. There were three other men at the table.

“Good evening, Jake,” bellowed Miller. His ever-present ruddiness seemed even more flush than usual. Jake gave a tiny nod and touched the brim of his hat.

“Good evening, Mr. Miller. How can I help you?”

“I want you to arrest the men at this table.”

“What for, sir?”

“They have committed outrageous literary crimes.”

There was an outburst of laughter from the men at the table. Jake twitched his jaw. He didn’t understand the joke. He didn’t want to be the butt of it, either.

“I don’t have the authority to arrest someone for that,” he said.

The men laughed again. Jake didn’t have time to play games with drunkards, even ones as well-heeled as this group appeared to be.

“Let me introduce you to my friends,” said Mr. Miller. “If you arrested us all, you would singlehandedly reduce the published output of our little village about ninety percent. I’ll start over here, with the youngest, an ink-stained wretch still working under the oppressive thumb of his city editor. Jake, this is Neil. Last name Morgan. Young Morgan hopes to someday throw off the yoke of his task masters and write a real book. Something about the new California and its bright-eyed achievers. Neil, this is Jake Stirling. I have now provided you with an honest contact in the San Diego Police Department. You’re welcome.”

The man with reddish-blond hair nodded at Jake.

“Pleased to meet you, officer,” he said. Jake nodded back.

“And across from me is Ted Geisel,” Miller continued. “Who writes a few small words, mostly for children, and gets paid extravagantly for them. That’s the only reason we let him in the group. He also draws very strange pictures.”

Geisel nodded at Jake. He was older than Morgan, with flat graying hair and a sharp hooked nose.

“And I believe you’ve met our most senior member before,” said Miller, indicating the man who sat at the corner of the table closest to Jake. The man tilted his gaze up from the table, turning his face toward the light.

“Mr. Chandler,” Jake said. “I thought you’d moved to England.”

He started to offer a handshake, but Chandler waved it away.

“It was too damn cold there,” the old man grumbled. “Nothing but faded gentry who paw at me during parties and refer to me as that American genius.”

“Yes,” said Miller. “Apparently Ray’s books have convinced the literary cognoscenti of England that Americans all speak like gangsters and use overwrought similes.”

“Better overwrought similes than overblown travel brochures,” said Chandler, glaring back at Miller.

“Touché, Ray,” said Miller. “You haven’t lost your ability to shoot a dead scribbler straight in his pocketbook.”

“Perhaps it’s time for us to go home,” said Morgan.

“Yes,” said Geisel. “I’m afraid our grins are showing.”

“There you go again, Ted,” said Miller. “Making up words. None of my editors would let me get away with a word like that.”

“Nor mine,” said Morgan.

“They might soon,” said Geisel. He winked at Morgan, who nodded back, as if the two men shared a secret.

“What brings you in here, anyway, Jake?” said Miller.

“I’m looking for a man named Nicky Hilton,” Jake said. “Do any of you know him?”

“You mean that spoiled brat who married Elizabeth Taylor?” said Morgan.

“Yes, sir.” Jake nodded. “I believe that’s correct.”

Max Miller leaned forward, addressing Morgan.

“Was he the one who got in that kerfuffle after the Playhouse soirée?” he asked. Mr.

Morgan nodded in agreement.

“When was this?” Jake said.

“Two nights ago,” said Miller. “He was screaming at somebody out by the valet station.”

“Any idea who he was screaming at?” Jake said.

Max Miller looked over at Neil Morgan. They both shook their heads.

“Check with the valets,” said Mr. Morgan. “They might remember.”

“Thank you,” Jake said. “Goodnight, gentleman.”

He turned on his heel, left the bar and headed back to his car. Writers were a strange breed of men. Back at the valet station, the kid in charge sat on a stool next to the key cabinet, biting his fingernails. He glanced up as Jake approached. The boy looked familiar, perhaps someone Jake had encountered on patrol, but Jake couldn’t remember the name or situation. He saw a lot of familiar faces while on patrol. Some made a stronger impression than others. He pulled out his notebook. The valet looked nervous.

“I’m looking for a hotel guest who might have ordered a cab,” Jake said. “His name’s Nicky Hilton.”

“Yeah.” The valet nodded. “I know that guy. He gets a cab every night. About the same time.”

“Did he go out tonight?”

“Yeah.” The valet nodded. “I heard him say something about Van Nuys.”

“Van Nuys,” Jake said, scowling as he jotted the name in his book. “Isn’t that in Los Angeles?”

The valet shrugged.

“I dunno. That’s what I thought he said. Check with the cab company.”

“I will. Were you here two nights ago?”

“Yeah. So?”

“I heard there was some sort of incident. Mr. Hilton yelled at someone?”

“Oh yeah,” said the valet. He chuckled. “He got really nasty with that lady, calling her all sorts of names—slut, whore, that kind of stuff.”

“Do you know who this woman was?”

“Sure. She was in that Martin and Lewis circus flick. Real glamour-puss. Zaa Zaa something?”

“Zsa Zsa Gabor?”

“Yeah, that’s her. He, Mr. Hilton I mean, he went kind of crazy. He called her a ... he called her a cunt. Can you believe that, right out here in public? I don’t know what she would’ve done if TD hadn’t stepped in.”

“TD? Todd DuBarry?”

“Yeah. Big Todd. You know him, right? Todd grabbed that Hilton guy and gave him the bum rush halfway up the street.”

Jake scribbled in the notebook, then reread his notes to make sure he’d captured the important details. Nicky Hilton sounded like a real piece of work. A car pulled into the spot next to his squad car. The valet climbed down from his stool, preparing to greet the driver. Jake

wondered how Todd had managed to get involved in all this. It seemed important, but he didn't know why.

“Does Todd work here?” Jake said. “At the hotel?”

“Oh no,” said the valet, stepping off the curb. “Todd was driving that lady's big Cadillac. He was her chauffeur.”