



**PART ONE**

# **SIBLINGS**





1998

The Year of the Tiger



## Wheeler and Prescott

**T**he locker room at the exclusive Westridge Country Club was Wheeler Cassidy's "spot." He arrived every morning around ten and flopped down on the tan leather sofa, then browsed the *L.A. Times*. Of late, he had just been scanning the front page, then going directly to sports, reading the racing results and ball scores. The rest of the paper failed to interest him. He used to read it cover to cover, but now the pointless articles on the Metro page about police brutality or campaign finance abuses didn't concern him anymore. He had been vaguely aware of the fact that his world had been narrowing but had managed to flush those thoughts with Scotch shooters.

The beige couch was also good because it was in front of the picture window that overlooked the tennis courts, which afforded him a prized spear-fishing spot. He could either tag up on a new member's wife coming back from her tennis lesson or pick up a golf game with some middle-aged walk-over. By one P.M., he had usually moved from the comfortable On-Deck Circle to Home Plate, which was the last stool at the bar in the grill. From there,

he would swing lazily at the slow curves that wandered past in sexy tennis skirts.

Wheeler was thirty-seven, tall and good-looking in a careless, bad boy sort of way that women of all ages seemed irresistibly drawn to. His curly black hair hung loosely on his forehead. His square jaw and white teeth were babe-magnets, although his once rock-hard abs were beginning to take on some extra padding and his hands were starting to shake at eleven each morning. Once he got his first Scotch shooter—Blended Vat 69—they calmed down.

Wheeler had not turned out the way he was supposed to. He had not lived up to his father's expectations. His first spectacular failure had been sixteen years ago when they'd thrown him out of the University of Southern California for being drunk and disorderly, and according to one University Regent, "an irredeemable scholastic project." The final incident that propelled his expulsion was a fist fight he'd gotten into at Julie's Bar after the S.C.—Stanford game. He had endured three Bay Area assholes for almost two hours before slipping his thousand-dollar Cartier watch off his left wrist and putting the misplaced Stanford alumni in the U.S.C. Trauma Ward. Wheeler had a solid punch and, even drunk, he could still bang one off you. His left hook was lethal. He preferred talking to hitting, but occasionally had to "step outside" with somebody. Fighting was a necessary skill when you were periscoping other people's women.

Wheeler Cassidy had been famous at U.S.C. He was that guy that everybody talked about . . . the tuna fisherman's tuna fisherman. The stunts he'd pulled were legendary: like jumping off the roof of the Tri-Delt House on a dare or driving his VW into the L.A. Coliseum at half-time during the U.C.L.A. game. On the side of his paintbrushed-cardinal-and-gold VW Rabbit, he had written, "Have one on me, Bruins." Then he sprayed the U.C.L.A. rooting section with warm beer from a supercharged keg. He'd been arrested six times for various violations and pranks before finally being expelled. His exploits were written up in the *Cardinal and Gold*, the student paper, at least once a month during his colorful

three-year academic career, but that was a long time ago. Now he was what some people would call a country club bum. The Westridge Country Club in Bel Air, California, was his haunt.

The W.C.C. had all kinds of strict membership requirements: Your family and ethnic background had to be acceptable; you needed to be well placed in society; and no members of the entertainment community were ever accepted. Wheeler got in on a junior membership when he turned twenty-one because his father, Wheeler Cassidy, Sr., had been a longtime member.

However, Wheeler Jr. was currently up before the W.C.C. disciplinary committee. They were trying to decide whether to kick him out for a one-nighter he'd had with the beautiful but restless wife of a senior member who was also, unfortunately, head of the club's rules committee. The affair had resulted in the couple's messy divorce. It was the memory of Wheeler's late father that so far had stayed the axe, but this time it looked like his expulsion from the club was inevitable.

Wheeler Sr. had been an investment broker and portfolio analyst who had made it big, eventually opening his own brokerage firm. He had died last year, taking with him Wheeler Jr.'s sole reason for being. There was something exhilarating about being the bad seed son of a domineering, humorless father that lost its thrill when Dear Ol' Dad hit Boot Hill. Now all of Wheeler's pranks seemed more desperate than funny. His father's anger had always been the rimshot that saved the joke.

Wheeler started drinking more after his father died, and now, in the morning when he got up, his head was dull as racial humor. His eyes were filled with grain, his stomach always on the edge of revolt. He was approaching middle age and, apart from three years at U.S.C. and another two in the Marines, he'd never accomplished anything.

He'd joined the Marine Corps only to fend off his father's threat that he would lose his inheritance for being chucked out of college. Then, just when it looked like he'd straightened out, being accepted for elite Special Forces training, he'd been dishonorably

discharged from his unit for fornicating with his Commanding Officer's wife. Since then, he had never finished anything, except for hundreds upon hundreds of bottles of blended Scotch. He'd once read about an old eccentric in the desert who had built a house out of empty beer bottles. If Wheeler had had any architectural ambition, his empties could have built a small city.

It was twelve-thirty and Wheeler's hands were beginning to tremble. It was still a little early, but he moved down the narrow hallway toward the grill, and his first shooter of the day. On the way he passed framed pictures of club pros and golfing celebrities who had achieved recognition or glory on the W.C.C. links. As he walked, he glanced through the glass doors of the private dining room that catered lunches for members, and saw his younger brother, Prescott, gathered with five or six businessmen. All of them had yellow pads in front of them, their finished meals pushed off to the side, making notes while Pres lectured. Pres's secretary, Angie Wong, spotted Wheeler, tapped Prescott's shoulder, and whispered. Pres glanced up. His narrow face and intense expression darkened at the sight of his brother. He shook his head slightly as if to say "Don't come in."

*Jeez, Pres, I'm not a typhoid carrier,* Wheeler thought. But he was ashamed of his younger brother's reaction to him. Wheeler knew he'd been an embarrassment to his dead father. He knew his mother had long ago tired of making excuses for him, and now Pres seemed afraid his older brother might stumble in, vomit on the table, and ruin his business meeting. Before moving on, Wheeler waved at his brother and smiled an apology through the glass door. Then, unexpectedly, Prescott's face softened and, for a moment, Wheeler saw on his brother's narrow features the same look of awe Pres had always given him during their childhood . . . a look of envy and respect that Wheeler hadn't seen in almost sixteen years.

Back then, Pres had thought his big brother could do any-

thing. Wheeler had been Pres's god, his idol. It was a time when if Wheeler had told his little brother to run through fire and jump off the Santa Monica cliffs, Pres would have ended up on the beach with his hair burning. Now things were different. Wheeler was a gravy stain on Pres's huge success. Prescott Cassidy was the family superstar now. At thirty-four, he was arguably among the most important lawyers in Los Angeles. One of the biggest names in the local political spectrum, a huge Democratic Party fund-raiser and power broker, Prescott handled complex legal problems and political deals while Wheeler honked down shooters in the W.C.C. grill. *Oh well, shit happens.*

That look of admiration that Wheeler thought he saw on his brother's face must have been a weird reflection in the glass or bad lighting. Even still, it made him stop . . . made him wonder why things had turned out this way.

He was sitting in the beautiful dining room that overlooked the third fairway, eating alone, when Pres and his secretary, Angie Wong, walked out of the club. Angie was a small, thin Chinese woman in her late forties who never seemed to smile, but had laser intensity and a personality as tough as federal taxes.

Angie looked at him, or through him, and didn't react. Pres never slowed as he moved on with the rest of his party. Pres was always in a hurry, always late to a very important appointment.

Wheeler was looking out the window, his mind far away, when he suddenly heard Pres's voice.

"Wheel?"

He looked up and saw his younger brother. Prescott's narrow face and intense manner hovered restlessly at the edge of the table like a dragonfly over a pond, afraid to land.

"How ya doin', Pres? Big deals, huh?"

Pres shot a look out to the front door where his party was just pulling away in valet-delivered cars. "Yeah, right. Got a minute?"

Wheeler was surprised. Everybody knew time was the big loss leader in the department store of disappointment he was managing. Wheeler had minutes, he had hours, he had years.

His time had become so cheap, it had almost no value except as chronology.

Wheeler motioned to a chair and Pres lowered himself into it. Pres glanced at his big brother and then the look was there again.

Just for a second; just for a flash. It was little Prescott's look from their childhood, an expression that said, *Wheel, can you show me how to catch a football? Can you help me learn to skateboard? Can you get her to go out with me?* Blue eyes looking at Wheeler Cassidy in worship and wonder; a look he'd once dearly treasured.

And then it was gone. Now Pres was looking down and frowning. A moment of business came next, so Pres could regain control. "I have your check," he said. "If I'd known I was going to see you today, I would've brought it. There are capital gains taxes on the big sale the estate just made on the O.T.C. Preferreds, so it's a little less this month than usual. But we had to sell that shit off. The portfolio was overloaded on media stocks." He looked up. "I know you're always running short around the twentieth but the Fed upped the estimated quarterly so I had to hold some back on the account."

"Right. That's okay."

"But if you get pushed, call me. I'll shoot you an advance against your quarterly dividends."

Wheeler lived on the estate money his father had left. It paid out over \$180,000 a year, after taxes. But Wheeler lived high and had expensive tastes in women, gambling, and cars. He often ran short and, even with his golf winnings, was sometimes mooching hundreds from friends by the end of the month.

As Wheeler looked at his brother, he saw something else he wasn't used to seeing. He saw tension. It was in and around the eyes, with maybe a tinge of panic. Usually Pres was all business. The white rabbit of the legal profession hurrying out the door, clutching his oversized watch. *I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date.* Business, of course, not pleasure. Prescott was "happily married" to Elizabeth, the Ice Goddess of charity and consciousness-raising. He had a twelve-year-old son, Hollis. Prescott was the eight-by-ten family man in a gold frame.



## R I D I N G T H E S N A K E

“Are you okay?” Wheeler asked, because his brother still looked uncharacteristically troubled.

“Uh, yeah, sure. Of course,” Prescott smiled, but the smile was the one you give the dentist so he can check your incisors. “Listen, Wheel, I . . . I wanted to tell you something . . . something I haven’t said in a long time. . . . It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.”

“Get a job?” Wheeler said, trying to preempt what he suspected was his younger brother’s latest attempt to knock him back onto the road of responsibility.

“I wanted to say I . . . that I love you. . . . Sometimes, with all the bullshit, that gets lost. I know things have been difficult since Dad died, but the memories I have of you, the important ones are . . .” He stopped, took a breath, then went on, “You’re the reason I made it. I just wanted you to know I haven’t forgotten.”

Wheeler was instantly choked. Tears rushed into his eyes. He looked at his brother and wondered what to say. He loved him too, but he also hated him. Why did Pres have to be such a damn world-beater? Why couldn’t he just be a good guy to go drinking with? Why did he always have to be first?

“Remember when you taught me to drive and we took Dad’s car and I went too fast on Angeles Crest and lost it?” Pres said unexpectedly.

“Jesus, you were nuts that night,” Wheeler contributed to the memory. He’d been sixteen. Pres had been only thirteen. Pres was driving and had slid their dad’s new yellow Corvette into the guardrail on the mountain highway, busting the fiberglass front fender, exploding it like fine crystal. The next morning Wheeler had told his father that he had taken the car out alone and had done the damage, which was more or less true. It had been Wheeler’s idea. Prescott had always been scared of their father, so Wheeler had taken the hit. Wheeler was grounded for two months, which didn’t mean much because he snuck out the upstairs window every night after his father went to bed anyway.

“I just wanted you to know I remember all the great stuff you

did for me when we were growing up, and I want you to know that I've always loved you and always respected you. Even now when, when . . ." He didn't finish it but sat there, looking at Wheeler, his hands clasped formally on the table in front of him. "Well, I just wanted to tell you that." He looked at his ten-thousand-dollar watch. "Guess I better go. Got a full calendar this afternoon," the white rabbit said, but he didn't move. He didn't leave the table or rush off. They looked at one another across the W.C.C. silverware and crystal. Time slowed, became more valuable. Seconds ticked. Precious seconds, precious even in Wheeler's discount store of failed expectations. They reached out to each other with their eyes and tried to find their childhood.

In the half-minute or so of silence, it was magically recovered. It was okay. They were brothers again. Sort of. And then Prescott said a very strange thing.

"Whatever happens, promise me you'll do the right thing."

Then Pres got up and walked out of the dining room without looking back.

Wheeler was unsettled by the incident.

It was almost as if his brother had been saying good-bye.