

## T H R E E

### The White Rabbit Takes a Dive

**S**everal days after the strange encounter with his brother, Wheeler sat in the W.C.C. grill bar and watched for Lois Atwater. She had been playing tennis on court three when he'd finished the front nine. Her long, tan legs had flashed invitingly under her short tennis dress. Lois was high up on his spear-fishing list. She had a tight, gym-trained body and an overweight, out-of-shape older husband. Her black hair was cut short and she seemed to constantly display her beautiful white teeth when Wheeler was standing around. She had that model's trick of being able to smile so that her bottom row got into the act. He knew he was close to pay dirt when she mentioned that her older sister had been at U.S.C. when he'd stolen the University fire truck and driven it up the steps of Annenberg Hall, crashing into the pillars of that august monument to higher education. This reckless stunt, pulled during the Middle European History exam, resulted in its postponement until after Christmas. *Rimshot. Another Wheeler Cassidy masterpiece.*

"Freshen that up for you, Mr. Cassidy?" Ramon Delgado

asked. Ramon was a handsome Mexican, short and muscular, about ten years older than Wheeler. He had witnessed many of Wheeler's spear-fishing tournaments from his penalty box behind the bar.

"Might as well keep the barley farmers in business," Wheeler said as a new shot was poured into his glass.

"John Haverston was in here this morning," Ramon said, his voice sort of ending in a question. John Haverston was on the membership disciplinary committee, which had been deliberating for almost a week on whether or not to give Wheeler the boot. "He was looking for you," Ramon continued. "I said you was out playing golf."

"I think we're about to have a W.C.C. execution," Wheeler mused. "I'll be beaten to death by old lawyers with putters."

"I don't know, sir. I think they just gonna tell you you gotta be more discreet. . . ."

Ramon polished the bar, trying to find a way to put difficult thoughts into words. Wheeler always thought it must be strange for Ramon to deal drinks to bums like him all day. Ramon, who had come across the border in the back of an empty, stinking gasoline truck, who had worked in the lettuce fields in central California to support his family until he got a job through his cousin on the maintenance crew at Westridge Country Club. Ramon, who learned near-perfect English and worked like a peon, and who now found himself behind the bar listening to millionaires' sons bitch about their lives.

"See, I think if a woman member is married but she don't respect the sanctity of her marriage vows and decides to take liberties in the bedroom, this is not totally the gentleman's fault . . . because, sir, this was not a good marriage, I think, to begin with."

"That's got nice Latin spin on it, Ramon, but I don't think this bunch of pooh-bahs is gonna see it your way."

He knocked back the drink in one swallow as the phone on the bar rang and Ramon moved down to answer it. Wheeler could hear him say, "He's right here, sir."

Ramon brought the phone over to him. It sort of bothered Wheeler that most people now knew they could find him at the W.C.C. bar any afternoon, but it didn't bother him enough to do anything about it. Still, it was discouraging, as if he'd dropped another notch on the social ratchet wheel. He put the phone to his ear.

It was Jimmy, a willowy, overtly homosexual blond man who was his mother's secretary.

"You must get here immediately," he lisped.

"Why? What is it . . . is Mother okay?"

"As if that matters one whit to you. . . ."

"Come on, Jimmy, cut the shit. What's up?"

"I'm not going to say. It's not my job to say. Better she tells, but you just better get your little white ass over here, Wheeler," and Jimmy hung up.

He thought it was also noteworthy that his mother's secretary felt he could sass Wheeler out. On the other hand, Jimmy was an expert on men's asses, so maybe it was just a nice compliment. With that amusing thought still rattling in his liquor-soaked head, he got up off the bar stool, dropped a twenty for Ramon, and left.

The Cassidy mansion was in Beverly Hills, on Wingate at the end of the cul-de-sac. It was a choice seven-acre spread, the house sitting in Colonial splendor on the top of a rolling hill of bright green, freshly mowed summer rye. He parked his new red XK8 Jag convertible out front and walked into the house, his hands in his pockets, linen pant cuffs flapping over polished Spanish leather loafers, feeling like a road-company Gatsby.

He had never lived in the house. His father had bought it just after Wheeler got thrown out of Special Forces. Wheeler had decided to live in sexual splendor with two topless dancers who worked the summer shows at the Trop in Vegas and were now wintering in Los Angeles, trying to open a health food restaurant. *Why does everybody in L.A. want to open a restaurant?*

Jimmy was standing by the banister with his hands on his hips, feet in fifth position, glowering savagely. "You're going to have to

help her. You're the only one she has left," he said. "She's going to need a lot more than a half-drunken bum."

"I really wish you'd just tell me what the hell is happening, Jimmy."

The young man chose to say nothing, but moved to the side and pointed to his mother's room upstairs. Wheeler climbed the long circular staircase to the upstairs hall. He could hear his mother crying. When he entered the bedroom, his mother looked up from the chaise longue by the front window.

It happened again, as it had for all the years he had known her. He was momentarily startled by her incredible beauty. She was sixty-five but looked forty, and it wasn't Beverly Hills plastic surgeons who had performed the miracle. He knew he had received his looks from her gene pool, but there was something about Katherine Cassidy, something so beautiful and restrained and elegant, that she always required a moment of reappraisal. As if his memory wasn't strong enough to carry her perfection. She turned to him.

"Prescott, Prescott . . . is dead," she said, and her hand wandered up to her mouth and covered her lips, almost as if she was afraid the evil sentence would return.

"What?" Wheeler said, his mind in full gallop. "Dead? How?" Three one-word sentences. *Mr. Bullshit comes up dry.*

"How could this happen?" his mother wailed.

"Mom, who told you? Are you sure?"

"The police. They came by two hours ago. We didn't know where to find you."

"I was at the club," he said, instantly regretting the remark. "Did he . . . ? Was it . . . ?"

"Heart attack," his mother whispered. "They found him in his office, at his desk, when they came to work this morning." And then she started to cry again.

It was such a mournful wail that Wheeler rushed to her and put an arm around her, trying desperately to comfort her. He felt the racking sobs. Her muscles quivered with the sickening effort.

“Mother, mother, I’m here,” he said, as if that made any fucking difference. “I’m here,” he whispered, and she reached down and squeezed his hand. The squeeze sort of said it all. It was the way you’d squeeze a child’s hand when you want him to be quiet.

“What can I do? How can I help?” he asked, his mind still racing. Somehow, just like that—in a heartbeat—Pres wasn’t part of the race anymore. He’d been scratched on a coronary technicality. Wheeler’s world had shifted again. Prescott Cassidy had checked off the planet.

“Why? Why Prescott . . . ?” Kay said.

And immediately, Wheeler knew that the full sentence went: *Why Prescott and not Wheeler?* After all, Wheeler was the foul-up. The country club lush who was only trying to screw other people’s wives. Wheeler was just taking up bar space while Prescott was taking up political causes. Wheeler was a much better candidate for a medical crack-up—he’d been processing ninety-proof Scotch through his kidneys and liver faster than a mid-sized distillery. Why Prescott and not Wheeler? *Goddamn good question.*

“The office has been calling,” Kay finally said. “They’re frantic. I don’t know what to tell them.”

“What office?” Wheeler said, dumbly.

“*His* office. Nobody knows what to do. Can you go see if you can help?” she asked, not looking at him, her eyes out the window as if maybe Pres was out there winning another race, about to come in and surprise them with a new gold trophy.

“Mom, what do I know about Pres’s law office? What do I . . .” He stopped, speechless, because she looked at him with such a pained expression of anger and regret he felt dismembered by it.

“Okay, I’ll go. I’ll go over there.”

So, with very little else to say, that’s exactly what he did.

What he found made absolutely no sense at all.