

Prologue

DECEMBER 25, 1975

A “white Christmas” is rare in Southern California. Christmas *is* cold, however—at least by some standards; and the cold of the season can cut in many ways.

But it was warm in the new Cadillac. The car was making its way north up the I-5 from the rich Pacific shore of the South Bay to the bottom of Five Mile Grade, the long uphill pull that summits into “the Grapevine”—the volatile rocky straits that link the southern and northern ends of the Golden State.

The Caddy wasn’t going *that* far.

The end of the line would be Wayside Honor Rancho in Castaic. That jail was about the only thing out there in those days; the residential swell of Los Angeles hadn’t yet spread into that particular pocket of wilderness. The area’s population was coyotes, cats, hungry hawks, and dinner-sized rabbits. And the prisoners of Wayside.

On that windy Christmas morning, Karl and Thelma McMillen rode up there in their cozy, well-waxed Cadillac to see two of those prisoners.

Their sons.

WAYSIDE—later to become the Sheriff Peter Pitchess Detention Center—was a clearing house for inmates. A layover on the way to the various “big houses” around the state.

The McMillens parked behind the gates and boarded a prison bus to take them along the rest of the two-mile trail into the facility. The bus was in chilled contrast to the Cadillac—with graffiti, filmy windows, and an overall stickiness on the floor that made walking a noisy and nauseating business. Their traveling companions in the stiff seats around them were not like the company they usually kept. This wasn’t exactly their social niche.

But they were getting somewhat used to this shabby parallel world.

In *their* world, they knew the comfort of nice restaurants and the calm of coastal campouts and getaways; on the other side of the dim portal, they were becoming all too familiar with destinations like this one. And Corcoran. And Chino. And Jamestown. And Susanville.

NO CHRISTMAS CAROLS brightened the background of the waiting room. No bright decorations or glowing trees lit the visiting area. Just the weak lighting in the “cages”—the thick, glassed-in cubicles where inmates, soul mates, friends, family, and others on the official visitation list could share some magical, hands-off moments through the scratched opaque-and-wire mesh and the greasy short-wired phone receivers.

Tidings of comfort and joy...

This wasn’t the first, or last, holiday that Mark McMillen, twenty-one, and Chris McMillen, nineteen, would spend behind bars.

But on that special morning, the prisoner dispersal shuffle worked out in such a way that it gave an appropriately special gift to the McMillens. After all, it *was* Christmas. It wasn’t tied with a red ribbon, certainly, or wrapped in the velvet of a jewelry box, but it was something to be cherished. The California penal system’s version

of gold, frankincense, and myrrh was the convenience of having the McMillen sons both in Wayside at the same time.

The brothers had been arrested separately on unrelated offenses, so the idea that they were both passing through this transitional facility at the same time, en route to separate long-term lockups, really was a Christmas miracle right up there with George Bailey’s angel.

The boys were even placed in side-by-side cages, allowing the McMillens to visit with them both simultaneously.

Merry Christmas.

Although Wayside was isolated in one of the last vestiges of scenic rurality in L.A. County, Mark and Chris’s home on The Strand in Hermosa Beach had much better views, saltwater scents, and ocean sounds—ones that didn’t involve distorted thick plastic, stale cigarette stench, and the rampant roar of growled arguments and orders.

But Hermosa was fifty miles and a million litigious light-years away.

Karl McMillen, Jr., had built a business—and a family, or so he thought—based upon honesty, integrity, and climbing those steep walls to success completely exposed, out in the open. It was so hard being in a facility that was a monument to the antithesis of all that.

It was so hard seeing his two fortunate sons mired in the antithesis of all that.

Karl knew “the good life,” certainly, in the economic sense. But at his core, he had always been a jeans, tennies, and camp-on-the-ground kind of guy—looking at each day, each sunrise, each sunset, and each crash of an ocean wave as a miracle to be savored.

His sons grew to look at each day very differently. Sunrises became continuums of lost nights. Each day—whenever it began—was just another exercise in artful dodging and hustling. Dodging the law, hustling for drugs.

Sometimes Chris and Mark would reach out, wanting so badly to reconnect and to re-savor those bright days and miracle waves.

Sometimes.

But drugs have power. Addiction has power.

And sometimes—for a variety of reasons—the good guys lose.

Those reasons haunt. They lead to sleepless nights of second guesses in the restless dark. Karl would spend plenty of those haunted and restless nights, seeking those reasons again and again. He knew that somehow this whole horrible situation needed to become an example for others. That it could somehow help extend strong hands the next time *someone* reached out. That it could help turn lost nights back into days that could be cherished for the miracles that they are—not the distortions and twists of a parallel world of poisons and pain.

BUT NEW IMAGES would add to a lifetime of haunting.

The flat gray of the Wayside visiting room wasn't quite the blue of the Pacific; the concrete chill of the scuffed floor was definitely not the warm shores of Baja or Australia that the family had enjoyed together.

Still, looking at their beloved sons *did* provide a cocktail of holiday cheer for Karl and Thelma—mulled with the spices of sorrow and shame. Prison tattoos had replaced the tans. Handcuffs had replaced the shortboard leashes.

What child is this...?

The tattoos may have been the worst for Karl—hard-hewn scarlet letters that were sick proof that all of this was actually happening.

How did we get here?

VISITING HOURS OVER, the phone receivers hung up, Chris and Mark were ushered back to their cells, and the Caddy headed south—returning to the beach. To a home no longer defined as it had once been.

No parties filled the beachfront patio; the shelves and walls had been stripped of their surfing-contest awards. The high hopes for this family and its sons had changed—from sky's-the-limit potential to a mere day-to-day hope of survival.

And then to mourning and head-shaking sorrow.

What never did change was Karl McMillen's appreciation of those daily miracles. Many more Christmas mornings like that one at Wayside would lead to Karl's showing his appreciation in more intense and tangible ways. His sons' tragic choices would become an example and a caring catalyst for helping others.