

# PROLOGUE

Jim paced their bedroom, reeling from what ended up being his last day of work. They always discussed major life-changing decisions. This time, he didn't consult her; he just did it. He quit his job.

He rubbed his hand over the stubble that had grown on his usually bald head and stared out of the second-story window at a rickety old tree house. He hadn't always been bald, but when his hair had started to thin, he'd just shaved the whole thing off and never looked back.

"It'll be fine," his wife said, buzzing around him, packing a suitcase. "You could have retired two years ago if you wanted."

Karen was his everything, and her words of support were always there, but he didn't want to talk about it. He just wanted to move on. "I really need to take that old tree house down."

"I don't think so, mister," she pulled his face away from the window and pierced his soul with her pale-green eyes. "You and the girls built that together; it's not going anywhere." She let him go and continued to bustle around the room.

The girls were gone. They were grown-up and off starting families of their own. Jim and Karen were in their mid-fifties; it seemed as if everything had changed overnight, but he looked at her and still saw the girl he almost didn't have the nerve to ask out thirty

years before. Sure, there were lines around her mouth and eyes that hadn't always been there, but she looked just as fresh and exciting as the day they met.

"Do you remember the time they had that sleepover, and you spent the night up there with your radio and twelve-pack?" she asked.

"Yeah, that was a fun night," he said. Of course he remembered; even just the thought of it brought a smile to his face. "Until I fell out."

"You were so drunk, you didn't feel a thing," she laughed, and then she realized what he'd done. "Hey, don't change the subject. We are going on this trip."

"Should we, though?" he asked. "Can we still afford it?"

She stopped packing. "We're fine. We've already paid for it. We *are* going."

"But—" he started.

Karen immediately shut him down, poking him in the chest as she spoke. "No buts. We're going, and we're going to enjoy ourselves. We're getting on a plane to Florida tomorrow, and that's that."

He acquiesced, rubbing the spot she'd poked. She was little, but she was strong. "Fine, but I'm not going to have fun."

"Oh, Jim," she said, touching her head. She tried to turn as she winced, but she couldn't hide the pain from Jim.

"The headaches still?"

"I'll be fine," she said.

"You still have the appointment in the morning?" he asked, observing her in the mirror fastened to the top of her dresser as he fumbled absentmindedly through an open drawer.

“Yes,” she said. “But I’m going to postpone it until we get back.”

He turned back to her. “Oh, no; you’re keeping that appointment. I’m taking you. Besides, our flight isn’t until the afternoon.”

“OK, OK, I’ll go,” she said. She pointed to the dresser. “Hand me that sweater, please.”

“Sweater?” he asked. “We’re going to Florida.”

“You know I’m always cold,” she said.

“Women.”

He turned back to the dresser and spotted the sweater. While his back was turned, she touched her head again; the pain was worse than she wanted him to know. He returned to her, pressing a bikini top to his chest.

“This one?” he asked sheepishly, knowing it would definitely look better on her.

She laughed as she threw a pair of socks at him.



Florida agreed with Jim and Karen. They spent a lot of time just wandering the coast, cruising down A1A in the convertible she insisted on renting. Jim wasn’t a cop here. Karen wasn’t a nurse. They were just Jim and Karen, two kids without a care.

They wine and dined at beachfront crab shacks. Suds and sun. Maybe there was a reason so many people retired here. The more they saw, the more they liked.

“You know, the girls love it here,” Karen said, her hand dangling in the wind whooshing by the car. “And they don’t even live by the beach.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I can’t remember having this much fun in a long time,” she said. She touched his hand as he shifted gears. “What do you say?”

“To what? Did I miss a question?”

She smiled. “What if we moved here? You basically just retired. There are nursing jobs everywhere. We could just move here.”

He stopped at a red light. An elderly man with a walker trudged across the intersection in front of them. Jim pointed to the man. “What is it they say about Florida? ‘God’s waiting room?’”

“James Mortimer Phillips!”

He laughed. “Uh-oh, all three names.”



Karen was clever. Maybe in another life, she could have played the espionage game, but she chose a life with Jim. She had guided him there without him ever sniffing a hint. Quite the feat considering Jim spent the majority of his career as a detective.

She made it seem like they were just tooling around and stumbled upon it. There was something about it that seemed to fit the bill perfectly. Never mind the months of research she had done to find it.

*Kismet.*

“This looks interesting,” Karen said, pointing to the sign for a neighborhood just ahead. “Let’s stop in here.”

The sign was pristine.

Shady Place: Active Adult Community 55+

Jim read aloud, then looked to his wife. Her eyes told him they didn’t just stumble upon this hidden treasure.

# O NE

*Shady Place, Active Adult Community, 55+.*

Luscious landscapes await! Live the lifestyle you were always meant to have! Make your friends jealous! Never shovel snow again!



It went on like that for a while, incessant ramblings about how wonderful the neighborhood was, heaven on earth. The brochure had become tattered and worn from years of being studied, flipped through, and overly consumed. Fingerprints smudged the edges. It was a reminder of a time that still had hope, a time when the future was still vast and full of promise.

Originally, the pamphlet held vibrant colors in the supporting images of people having the times of their lives. Vibrant landscapes, golf, tennis, pools, dinner, dancing; the list was endless. All this in one happy, shiny neighborhood for adults fifty-five and up. The residents were all gloriously happy playing games, frolicking, and enjoying all that life had to offer in the AARP years. All set to the glow of sunny Florida.

They were actors, of course. None of them actually lived in Shady Place. Well, maybe a few did. Jim had told himself for years that these happy people were paid to be that way. No one enjoyed those things, not in real life. He didn't, so why would they? This is

how he justified putting it off for so many years. Where was the brochure with the people staying home, not interacting with others, cloistered in their own personal caves?

But he already had that.

He clung tightly to the Shady Place pamphlet for years after Karen's death. The last time he would see it was the day he moved there.



“Dad?”

The plea went unanswered.

The tree house sat in the backyard for thirty years. It was rickety and worn, but it had character. Jim had built it for his two daughters. He'd hoped at least one would be a boy, even asked Karen to give it one more try, but to no avail. He may not have gotten a boy, but he did get two girls he loved, two girls he spoiled as much as he could. He gave them all he could, nice things, a nice home, good schools. They got the best Jim had to offer. That day, they got a healthy dose of the stubbornness he'd spent a lifetime cultivating.

They stood at the base of the tree, staring up at their childhood getaway. The duo teemed with frustration.

“He's up there; he has to be,” Jenny offered, shaking her head in consternation. She was in her early thirties, the younger of Jim's daughters, a blonde like he once was but with her mother's pale-green eyes. She bounced a baby on her hip, her second, a boy named after her father.

“Come on, Daddy, you're acting like a baby,” Heather barked. Jim's other daughter was more serious than Jenny. She was a little older and looked much more like Karen than Jim, but unlike her sister and mother, she shared Jim's dark-blue eyes.

Jenny sighed. “Seriously, we know you’re up there!”

“You need to come down and sign the papers.” Heather’s frustration grew.

A sign of life.

“Go away!” Jim called down.

Perched above them, Jim rubbed his fingers gently over a heart carved into the wooden wall. Inside the crude heart was etched “JP + KP” with a smaller JP and HP below them. Remnants of a happier time for Jim. Clutched in his other hand was the brochure for Shady Place; it was more crumpled and frayed than ever. It didn’t really matter if he had the brochure anymore, he was supposed to be leaving for his new home today.

Sentimentality had him reconsidering.

Jim’s face had grown tired and the years had seen him add a few more pounds to his frame than he would admit. It was more from neglect than anything else. He was in his sixties now, but his eyes seemed so much older. Not his vision, though; if you asked Jim, his vision was perfect, better than 20/20. He was bald by choice, but it had been so long since he’d let his hair grow, there was no telling what it would look like if it ever made it past a stubble.

Jenny shouted from below, “Daddy, please! The movers are almost finished, just come down! We have a long drive.”

“You can’t make me,” Jim proclaimed, acting the petulant child.

Heather and Jenny were at a loss. Heather decided, “One of us is going to have to go up there.”

“I just had a baby,” Jenny said, holding her young child close. “Mommy can’t be climbing, can she?”

Heather rejected her argument. "Give me a break; it's been six months!"

Jenny shrugged and booped Jim's tiny namesake on the nose.

Heather furrowed her brow and turned her attention back to their father. "What's the problem, Daddy?"

"You're making me leave my home. What do you think the problem is?" Jim said.

Jenny replied, "It's time to move on..."

"You don't even care! This is where you grew up. Where your mother and I..." He stopped.

Heather jumped in; it was time to tag team him. "It will always be where we grew up, but you made a promise..."

At Heather's urging, Jenny kept pushing. "This is what you and Mom wanted!"

"We were supposed to go together," he returned softly, almost in tears.

The silence was deafening.

When Jim made up his mind and dug in, it was for the long haul. The movers were nearly finished, they had a long drive ahead of them, and their poor Realtor was waiting patiently inside. Jenny and Heather had to get him down. Now.

Jenny knew how to end the standoff. "James Mortimer Phillips, you come down from that tree house this instant. This is not a game. We have to get on the road."

Heather raised an eyebrow at Jenny, mouthing *Mom?*

Jenny nodded with a smirk plastered across her face, and baby Jim giggled; his mommy was so silly.

They waited. It felt like an eternity, but it was only a few seconds before Jim leaned over the edge slightly.



“But—”

Not today, Jenny wasn't having any more lip, “No buts! Now!”

He let out a heavy sigh, one word escaping with the deep exhalation, “Fine.”

He began climbing down but stopped after just a few steps. He climbed back up a step and tried to pry his treasured wooden plank from the wall. He grabbed hold and pulled, his footing precarious at best. One misstep sent him tumbling to the ground.

The girls rushed to his side to make sure he was all right. His breath was gone, but he pushed the words out anyway. “Would have hurt less if I was drunk.”

Heather brushed some grass from his head. “I assumed you were.”

Jenny remembered out loud, “Isn't this like the time you were drunk during our sleepover and fell out of the tree house? Remember that?”

He frowned at her, furrowing his brow. *Of course he remembered.*

“That was funny,” Heather smirked. “You had more hair then.”

Jim was not amused.



With the stroke of a pen, Jim signed the last of the paperwork to sell the house his kids had grown up in, the first place he and his wife, Karen, had ever lived together. The *only* place they ever lived together.

With his Realtor at his side, Jim wasn't quite ready to relinquish control just yet. The Realtor tried to slide the papers out

from under his hand, but Jim resisted, clamping his fist down hard on the last page.

“And that’s the last one,” the Realtor said, struggling to pull the page away. “If you’ll just...” He finally succeeded in yanking the page out from under Jim’s hand, garnering a silent, angry glare from the crotchety old man. “Thank you, sir.”

“Screw off.” Jim got up and walked away without an ounce of courtesy, ignoring the extended hand his Realtor offered.

No sooner than he’d risen, the movers grabbed the table and chairs they had been sitting on and shuffled them out the front door.

Jim plodded his way to the house’s threshold before turning back and looking at his empty home. But it wasn’t home anymore, at least not his.

Now it was just a house.

He closed his eyes, envisioning all the good times his family had over the years. The holidays, the family get-togethers, the girls growing into beautiful women, into mothers. He spent too much time at work, but he never missed the significant moments.

Most importantly, she was always there. Karen, his rock, the most loving, hardworking person he ever knew. A smile wrinkled the corners of his mouth.

He opened his eyes, and it was over. There was nothing left, only an empty room, a broom and dustpan, and a little pile of dirt awaiting that last sweep into the pan.

“Come on, Pop; it’s time to go.” Heather put her hand on his shoulder, startling him.

He lowered his head and walked out.

*Defeat.*

The neighborhood had changed dramatically since they'd moved in all those years ago. It changed, yet it more closely resembled the Philadelphia suburb he'd moved into originally. He was the last remnant of a generation who raised their kids together, but they were all gone. He was the last holdout. All his contemporaries had moved on, and now, it was Jim's turn. For the neighborhood, it was a new generation's turn.

On the street, his sons-in-law lingered around his car—a 1966 Shelby GT 350-H; it had the rarer white and blue paint job. He'd had it since 1980. It was Jim's baby, the only thing he'd ever splurged on in his life. His father rented one from Hertz when he was a boy, and he'd vowed to own one. He still thought about his father every time he looked at it.

Jim watched them argue over who would drive his car first. "Tell me again why the idiots are driving my baby and not me?" "Idiots" was the term of affection he used for the dynamic duo who were his sons-in-law, Kevin and Terry.

"Because we can't trust you to make it to Florida on your own." Heather pointed to her SUV where Jenny was securing baby Jim in his car seat in the back. "It'll be a chance for you to bond with your loving daughters and new grandson. It'll be fun."

Jim glowered at the boys as Heather led him to the SUV. "You said it right the first time; you just want to keep an eye on me." He pointed to Kevin and Terry. "Not a scratch!"

The boys fake saluted him, then hopped in and fired her up. Jim cringed in disapproval. Heather opened his door, put her hand on his head, and guided him into the back seat. He felt like a perp being placed in a police cruiser. "Watch your head."

“Funny,” Jim said, but the door was closed before he could get the word out. He stewed in the back seat next to his young grandson, who was sucking on a pacifier.

Baby Jim—*more like Replacement Jim*, he thought. They had the same haircut and eyes. He rubbed the boy’s head, then turned his attention back to his daughters. Jim watched Jenny and Heather talk to the Realtor, then they shook hands and parted. It all seemed simple enough, but what he was sure he saw was the Realtor asking the girls what was wrong with their old man.

*Is he senile?*

*Why is he such a dick?*

*We really fleeced him, didn’t we?*

He already hated salespeople; the dialogue he invented in his head served only to exacerbate those feelings. The whole transaction was capped off by the Realtor flipping him the bird as the girls walked away.

That one was the last straw. Jim tried to open the door quickly; he grabbed the handle and pulled, thrusting his whole body outward so he’d be at a full sprint when it opened. But it didn’t open. Pulling the handle did nothing, and Jim smacked his face right into the closed window with a thud.

Jim rubbed his forehead, snarling like a caged dog, as the Realtor cocked his head at him with a peculiar look on his face. The girls took their places in the front of the SUV, laughing at their father.

“Child locks,” Jenny snickered. “But nice try.”

“You’re holding me captive; this isn’t fair,” he said. “I know that little shit flipped me off; I saw it!”

Heather spun around from the driver's seat to reassure him. "First of all, watch your language. Second, that little *shit* just set the record for highest sale on this street. *For you*. Show a little gratitude!"

Jim had a tough exterior but always seemed to back off when a woman raised her voice, the result of being raised under the watchful eye of a strong woman. He slouched down in his seat and mumbled to himself.

As they pulled away, he spun around for one last look at his house. His sanctuary. He wanted to complete his punishment. That's what it was. It was punishment for some unknown crime; he was certain of it. He wanted to watch it shrink into oblivion, to wallow in self-pity as his castle faded into the distance.

What he found was that stupid Realtor still giving him that same peculiar look. But this time, the action wasn't an invention of Jim's mind. The Realtor presented Jim with a prominent middle finger and wry smile. It was the only thing Jim witnessed fade into the horizon.

"C'mon, you had to see that!"

Red-faced and sullen, Jim slid back into his seat. He looked to his young grandson. Baby Jim, *Replacement Jim*, gave him a laugh and reached for his head.

"Et tu, baby?"

# TWO

There are a lot of quotes about the value of the journey that leads to a destination. Nonsense. Whoever said those things has never traveled a thousand miles in a car with Jim's daughters and a baby.

The journey was long, it held no lessons, and was full of uncontrolled bodily functions from a baby that *should* have slept the whole way. Isn't that how it's supposed to go? Babies sleep in the car, right? Wrong. Replacement Jim barely closed his eyes for a second. When he did, it was to truly savor relieving himself. It was as if he was enjoying the foul odors emanating from his tiny body. Or at least enjoying the effect it had on those around him.

The trip *should* have taken a day and a half. Three able-bodied adults, taking turns, sixty miles an hour on average, just under seventeen hours drive time, plus stops for food, gas, and an overnight. They'd be there by the next afternoon. That's how it played out in Jim's head.

The reality was drastically different, prompting Jim to make three observations:

1. His daughters had nothing interesting to say.
2. Based on the amount of vomit and crap oozing out of him, his grandson should not be alive.

3. Everyone on the eastern seaboard was traveling at the same time as them.

The trip took three days. Three very long days. Three days that felt like three months to Jim, while his home was slipping further and further away.

He tried to make light of his situation; when they reached the highway, he let a rip.

“I can drive if you want,” he said.

“Daddy, stop,” Heather said.

Sure, he could stop, but what fun would that be? “You can pass on the left...never mind; too late. After this one. Nope, not now either.”

“Let her drive, Daddy,” Jenny chimed in.

“Are you going to pass these Sunday drivers or what?”

“Daddy!” Heather was getting fed up.

“Fine, fine, just trying to help!” He eased up, temporarily. He tapped his fingers on the back of Jenny’s seat. “How much further?”

Heather was close to her tipping point. “I will leave you on the side of the road.”

“I’m hungry.” Jim grinned almost imperceptibly, completely satisfied with himself.

“Wait, are you...” it dawned on Heather. “Is this for all the road trips we took when we were kids?”

He smirked.

“Damn it, Daddy, you’re a grown man!” Jenny huffed at him.

Jim fiddled with the child-locked door handle. “Could have fooled me.”

“Enough! I don’t want to hear another word.” Heather peered at him in the rearview mirror. “Silence. Got it?”

He nodded. They sat in silence for a moment, but only a brief moment. “Heather, darling?”

“What? What is it now?” She was ready to leave him at the closest rest stop.

“I have to pee.”



If you held the brochure up next to the real Shady Place, it would have paled in comparison. The real Shady Place was alive and vibrant. The moment you hit the front gate, there was an impressive four by six-foot stone framed wooden placard of a golfer’s silhouette inside a glorious oak tree. The lush landscapes were even greener than the images in Jim’s brochure.

The natives were out in force. They always were. Golf carts, pocket pooches, bicycles, power walkers, and glowing smiles crowded the streets and sidewalks.

Heather’s SUV rolled smoothly through the guarded checkpoint and into the belly of the beast. Jim watched from the back seat as the locals observed their arrival. Many smiled and waved.

“They’re all so,” he shook his head. “Old.”

Jenny said, “Daddy, you’re...”

“You’re...” Heather tried to cut Jenny off.

Jim finished the thought for them, “I’m what? Old?”

Jenny backtracked. “No, of course you’re not old, you’re uhhh...”

“Not giving this a *chance*; look at all the pretty ladies!” Heather brought it home.



Jim made a sour face at a few women; their tiny dogs sniffing each other at their feet. The duo returned Jim's sour face without missing a beat, dismissing him as quickly as they'd taken notice. It was a beautiful day, and no cranky old man was going to disrupt that for them.

"A chance," Jim hadn't stopped shaking his head since the guard shack. "You know I'm going to die here?"

Heather wasn't interested in hearing any more complaints. "Quit it."

"Look, girls, it's my ride. Just let me out here!" Jim pointed to a hearse-led funeral procession moving through the neighborhood. The natives all paused their activities to pay respects to the deceased.

Both of his daughters shouted at him in unison, "Daddy!"



Collectively, the residents of Shady Place were a diverse cross-section. Mike Johnson, Sanjay Patel, and Tommy Griffin watched the procession receding away from them.

Mike wore a hairpiece; it wasn't a good one, didn't look right, but no one ever said anything, and they just accepted it for what it was. He always had a cigar on him. His doctor told him if he kept smoking them, it would kill him, but he was so used to the oral stimulation that he needed something to take its place. Instead, he chewed on a Twizzler, the rest of the pack nestled behind the cigar he couldn't smoke in his shirt pocket.

"Another one bites the dust," Mike said.

"He was young," Sanjay added. Everyone called him Jay. He was a diminutive little guy, easily a foot shorter than Tommy and six inches below Mike. He sported a lampshade moustache finely

groomed to match the width of his lips; it was jet-black and matched the neatly cropped mane on top.

Tommy was the eldest. He was a former champion boxer from Alabama; his face showed the wear of years in the ring. While he still had the size of a heavyweight prizefighter, the distribution of weight had shifted from his upper body to his midsection. His voice carried a slow southern drawl. “Paper said sixty-three.”

Mike tested the waters on a theory. “Think there’s been a few too many of them lately?”

“Too many what?” Tommy asked.

Mike spoke with a distinctly Philadelphia accent. He tried to curb his use of words that made it stand out, but on occasion, he couldn’t help himself, “Youse know, deaths, too young, seems a little—fishy.”

“Everyone here is older...” Jay stated the facts as he saw them. He was always as straightforward as he could be, and since English wasn’t his first language, he always strove for perfect diction.

Tommy pointed to Heather’s SUV as it pulled up to the house next door. “Talk about fishy. Y’all get a load of this.”

Heather’s SUV came to a rest in the driveway, just next to a prominent For Sale sign emboldened with a rider reading SOLD in bright red letters.

Samuel Thane, who went by Sam, leaned on the front door. He was good-looking and well groomed; young enough that he could have gone to high school with Jenny or Heather. He was slick, but just slick enough not to be off-putting to the normal Shady Place clientele. Khaki pants, collared shirt, and a nice pair of shoes were his uniform; it was too hot in Florida to wear a suit and tie. Besides,

when all your customers are wearing flip-flops and shorts, why should you be the sucker in a three-piece.

He knew the tricks of dealing with folks older than him; don't be threatening, ask them questions, be excited, and always, always make them wish you were their son or grandkid instead of the shitheads they had back wherever they came from. Of course, for Jim, there was no level of slickness or nonthreatening behavior that would make him like Sam. Sam was, after all, the jackass who'd convinced his Karen to move to Shady Place.

"Into the abyss," Jim grumbled as he got out of the SUV.

Sam greeted him with a familiarity that made Jim cringe.

"Mr. Phillips! Welcome home!"

"You better have my keys, Thane," Jim brushed past him.

Sam threw his arm around Jim's shoulder. "As cranky as ever, I see! I love this guy!"

Jim threw Sam's hand off his shoulder, then shot him a dirty look. Sam returned a confident wink and led him inside.

Next door, the boys tried to get a look at the new neighbor, but the Realtor was obscuring him. "Looks like another guy; just what we need," Mike observed.

"Reckon he knows about Jerry dyin' there?" Tommy asked.

Mike shook his head. "Doubt it, Thane's all about the sale. That's another one went too early."

"Perhaps you are correct; there have been many who have passed somewhat prematurely lately." Jay was buying in.

Mike knew how to take an opening. "Maybe youse guys should tell the cops? See what they say."

"Your phone broke?" Tommy asked.

Mike danced around the question. “Uhh, well, it’s probably nothing...What do youse think the new guy’s story is?”

“I am to find out tomorrow. I am to give him a neighborhood tour. His name is James,” Jay said. “James something, I cannot remember; I have the paper at home.”

Heather lingered outside to greet the moving truck while the others headed inside Jim’s new home.

Tommy and Jay bickered back and forth across Mike about nothing in particular. They always seemed to have something to bicker about. He was too busy studying the group next door to care what they had to say. He failed to get a good look at his new neighbor, but it didn’t matter. He had plans. He took a big bite of his licorice twist and tossed it aside before popping his unlit cigar in his mouth.

“See you mooks later; I got a date.”



This was his first time seeing the house in person. Jenny had video-conferenced a walking tour, but he had never actually stepped foot inside the property. It was not unique; it wasn’t what Jim was used to. There was no character compared to the home he’d left back in Philly. Maybe it was because it was so empty or because it wasn’t home yet, but it was cold and sterile. The ceramic tile in the living areas, granite countertops, forty-two-inch cabinets, and stainless-steel appliances in the kitchen, none of it felt right.

Jim hated it.

Sam led him through the house, espousing an enthusiasm he hoped would rub off on Jim as he pointed to different features. Jim could barely muster more than a grumble or a dissenting observation about already having a house that he left behind with all the same

features. Jenny tried to help Sam massage Jim's psyche, but it was no use. He wasn't interested, and it didn't matter that none of Jim's apprehensions and observations were true, his old house was not this nice, not even close. Jim would never admit it out loud, but this house was better in every way than the one he'd left behind.

"What do you think? It's nice," Jenny urged. "Right, Daddy?"

"It's not..." Jim hesitated, "home."

After the tour, Sam brought Jim to the kitchen, "So we have one more paper for you to sign. You missed it in the closing package you mailed back."

Jim acted surprised. "Oh? I was sure I signed everything."

"Daddy, that's so unlike you," Jenny said suspiciously.

Sam pulled out a pen and stuck it in Jim's face. "Just one last signature, and it's all yours."

Jim slowly reached for the pen, took a deep breath, then made a dash for the front door. Jenny called out as he opened the door, "He's running!"

Terry and Kevin had already arrived and were speaking to Heather by Jim's car when he blew through the front door and shouted, "Keys!"

Kevin was midsentence complimenting the new digs, but Jim was insistent.

"Keys, now!"

Jenny and Sam rushed from the house in hot pursuit, urging Kevin not to hand over the keys, but it was too late.

They dangled in the air from Kevin's hand in slow motion as Jenny and Sam both spit out a prolonged "Nooooo." But it was as if someone had hit the fast-forward button on only Jim. He snagged

the keys from Kevin's hand and was in the car with the engine roaring to life and the doors locked before anyone knew what happened.

Heather threw herself in front of the car to impede her father's way, as Kevin threw his hands up in confusion. Jenny punched her "idiot" on the arm for relinquishing the keys, hitting him hard. So hard, it would leave a bruise.

Kevin tried to rub the throbbing away as he complained, "Damn, babe; that hurt!"

Next door, Jay and Tommy were mounted on a golf cart, ready to leave, but things had just gotten interesting. They were joined by at least a half a dozen other Shady Place residents being treated to an afternoon show.

"Daddy, come on!" Heather shouted at Jim, her hands on the hood. He shook his head from inside the car, revving the engine as though he'd actually do anything with her standing there.

Sam stepped through the madness and made his way to the car saying, "I got this."

He knocked on Jim's window. At first, Jim wouldn't even look in Sam's direction, but eventually, he relented. The girls and their husbands looked on in awe as the two spoke.

Terry observed in reverence, "That dude has some balls."

"You're wasting your time," Heather tried to move things along, but Sam simply held one finger in the air at her, *hang on*. Before too long, the engine was off, and Jim was exiting the car.

A furor ran through the group until Heather voiced what they were all thinking, "The hell?" It would take a minute to collect their jaws from the ground.

Jim brushed past the group without a word. A satisfied Sam triumphantly trailed Jim, but Jenny recovered and stopped him.

“Hold on. What did you say to him?” she asked.

“He’s not my first runner,” he laughed.

“Let’s go, Thane, I don’t have all day,” Jim called out to Sam from the house. “And I want that damned sign out of my yard before you leave here.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Phillips; right away, sir,” Sam replied, continuing toward the house, but he turned back when Heather grabbed his arm. The group pleaded for an answer.

“Would you characterize your dad as cheap?” Sam asked.

The group hemmed and hawed; of course Jim was cheap, so much so that it begged the classic question *How cheap is he?*

“He got his panties in a wad when I told him he’d lose his deposit if he didn’t close,” Sam smirked and walked away. That was it. The thought of losing a few grand was enough to keep Jim in line.

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” Kevin said.

Jim popped back out of the front door and wagged a finger at Kevin and Terry, “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about you two. Inspection in five.”

Kevin and Terry looked to the Shelby then back to where Jim stood. They both ran to the car at the same time.



Jim returned to his sons-in-law, lining them up for inspection. He always reminded them of a drill sergeant, but he had never served. His father served in the great war and beyond, and he instilled respect and pride in ownership in Jim. It had left Jim with a great reverence for the structure of the military, the order of it all.

Terry and Kevin had checked and double checked to make sure Jim's pride and joy was spotless. They stood beside the car while Jim paced back and forth. For someone who hated attention, Jim had no qualms about making a scene.

Jenny shook her head and went inside, "You're ridiculous. I'm going inside to supervise the movers. Maybe you can help when you're done screwing around out here."

Jim took several passes around the car, inspecting every inch. Occasionally, he rubbed a spot on the paint, then shot a quick glance at the boys to keep them uneasy. It was all for show, but Jim was enjoying the theatrics. They fidgeted as the exercise dragged on. Jim got in and checked the odometer, then peered around the interior, checking the floorboards and the glove box. He got out and stepped in front of the boys—the "idiots." They were both taller and bigger than him, but neither was as imposing.

"Did you follow all posted speed limits?" His question was directed at Kevin.

"Yes, sir," Kevin said.

Jim stayed trained on Kevin. "High test gas?"

"Yes, sir," Kevin repeated.

Jim glanced at Terry, then back to Kevin. "No deviations?"

"Umm," Kevin hesitated. "No."

A crack in the resolve had caught Jim's attention, and he turned to Terry. "No deviations?"

"We, uhh," Terry squirmed.

He already knew the answer. Jim had placed a small GPS device under the passenger seat of his Shelby. He spent an unhealthy amount of time on the trip south staring at an application he'd installed on his cell phone that allowed him to monitor the exact



position of his baby at all times. Yes, he knew exactly where they had been, when, and for how long, but he wanted to hear it from them.

Heather couldn't take any more. "They went to South of the Border and bought fireworks because they're man-children! OK, Daddy? Can we go inside now?"

Jim stared at Heather for a moment; she'd ruined his fun. His big reveal. He turned his gaze to the boys. They grew increasingly uneasy the longer he didn't speak. It was a tactic Jim had used during interrogations. The two began to rattle off excuses, something about a waiver and road flares, but it was useless. It was really for safety; you see? Jim didn't want to hear a word of it.

Finally, he spoke. "Illegal fireworks?"

"Are they illegal?" Terry questioned.

Kevin shrugged. "I don't think so..."

Jim presented the boys with a longwinded diatribe about the dangers of unsupervised use of explosives, a soliloquy on how irresponsible it was of them as fathers of young children and the example they were setting for his grandchildren.

"You should know better," he concluded, turning his back on them. "They stay with me."

Heather rolled her eyes at her father and directed him inside. "Daddy, why don't you go help unpack so you can decide where things should go."

The boys hung their heads as Jim passed by. They were genuinely upset about disappointing their father-in-law, but more so about losing their fireworks.

"Ummm?" Terry mocked Kevin's answer.

“We, uhhh,” Kevin mimicked Terry’s response to Jim. “You could have backed me up!”

The two argued to the point of wrestling on the lawn before Heather threatened to turn the hose on them.

She led them inside by their ears. “*Idiots.*”