

THE COUNTRY HOUSE

John Boston

“Malik.....tell me again why we’re doing this?” asked Marlene.

“You know why we’re doing this.”

“Malik, where the hell are we?”

Mailik and Isaiah looked back at Marlene. They were none too amused. She knew when to press and when to back off and right now, a tactical retreat was in order. She kicked herself for not stopping this sooner. She just didn’t like where it was headed.

There were just a few too many variables in this equation for her liking.

“What you gonna do Malik?”

“Marlene, could you just shut up for two goddamn seconds? Let Isaiah and I talk some strategy here.”

“You could be walking right into a trap.”

She had a point. It sounded so easy on the phone. Quick in, quick out. Whack a few honkies and make off with their drugs. He’s done far worse for far less reward.

Three months earlier, Malik’s cousin Duquon, had been shot in a drug deal gone south. He died the next day. Yesterday, someone called him and told him who had shot his cousin and where to find them. He also told them there was a small fortune in coke hidden in a second floor bedroom that was there’s if they wanted it. All they had to do was wait for the owner of the house to come home and kill him. The coke was payment for services rendered. The caller claimed to be a witness to the drug deal that killed Duquon. He said there was no reason to have shot him. Malik wasn’t sure if he could trust the man. He was a brother, if that counted for anything. He said the country house was really a safe house. The street value of the drugs was around a hundred thousand dollars. More than enough to retire on. He told Marlene the story that night. Naturally, she was slightly skeptical. It just didn’t make any sense.

“How’d this dude even get your number?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I ain’t hard to find. I get a hundred texts a day from people. I don’t even know half of them but they seem to know me.”

“Why didn’t this dude just shoot him himself and take the drugs? Why does he want you to do it?”

“I asked him that. He says he doesn’t want anyone to be able to pin the shooting on him. Says everybody, even the cops would suspect him. He needs us to do it and he makes sure he’s someplace else so he can have an alibi. Makes sense if you think about it.”

"I don't know Malik. It just doesn't sound right. There could be twenty honkies out there just waiting for us."

"Marlene, you want to work at the dollar store for the rest of your damn life? People like us, we ain't got no choice. It's do shit like this or live in the projects all our lives. I got a record and so do you. We ain't going nowhere." said Malik.

"My brother is not going with you. No way."

"You better tell him that. He thinks he's a little gang banger. Last time we hit a store, I gave his dumb ass a paintball gun and he still screwed it up."

"If he's going, so am I."

"Great. We leave in the morning. Eight o'clock.....don't be late. We ain't waiting for you."

Three hours later, here they were. Sitting on a deserted farm road in the middle of nowhere.

"I bet there ain't a brother around here for miles." said Isaiah.

"There ain't a cop around here for miles either." added Malik.

"How you want to do this?"

"You go in the back, I go in the front. We shoot anybody in the house."

"Just go all Terminator on them?"

"Pretty much. You got a better plan?"

"Not really. What if there's some old woman in the house?"

"She's dead." said Malik coldly.

"Come on man, we go shooting some old white grandma, every cop in the state is going to be looking for us." said Isaiah.

"They can't tie us to any of this unless we get caught. The van belongs to big Steve. He's in jail right now. As long as we return it before he gets out, he won't even know it's gone."

Isaiah looked at the house. It looked like it was ready to fall down. There was a tire swing hanging from a giant tree in the front yard. Even the barns out back looked like they were ready to fall over.

"Somebody actually lives in that pile of shit?" he asked.

"What you guys want me to do?" asked Marlene's brother. His name was James but everybody called him Soupee for some reason. Soupee was far and away the weakest link of the group. If Steve Urkel decided to become a gang banger, he would be a dead ringer for Soupee.

“Isaiah and I are going in. You stay here with your sister and do not move the van. If we aren’t back in an hour, get the hell out of here and don’t come back without reinforcements. Are we clear?”

“Yeah.” said Soupee, slinking into the back seat.

“Damn Malik, you ain’t got to go killing anybody. Why can’t you just tie them up. You brought zip ties, remember?”

“We don’t leave witnesses Marlene. You’re too nice girl.....that’s why you always get caught.” said Isaiah.

She watched Malik and Isaiah get out of the van and check their weapons. Malik had two 9mms. Isaiah had his sawed off shotgun and dozens of rounds. She tried to protest but she knew it wasn’t going to do a bit of good. The wheels were put into motion for this train wreck. She was more angry at herself for even coming along. She loved her brother dearly but she wasn’t going to spend the rest of her life in prison either. These were the types of brothers she had grown to dislike intensely.....maybe even *hate*. They were no better than the evil white men who had tortured her grandfather back in the old south. You live by the sword.....*then by Jesus, you gonna die by it too*. These were the types of brothers that could kill another brother, then go back to playing their video games. The type of brothers that filled the cages in the factory prisons. The types of brothers too stupid to know any better.....and here she was, right in the middle of it.

Malik and Isaiah crept up to the house. There was an old car parked out front. It looked as if it been there for years.....maybe even decades. They looked inside the house. It was dark inside, hard to see what was happening. Isaiah went around to the back and Malik went around to the front. They both kicked in the doors at the same time and ran inside. They met in the kitchen. Malik pointed to the upstairs. They went around to the staircase and slowly made their way up the stairs. They came to the first bedroom. Malik waited by the door, while Isaiah walked over to the other bedroom. He pushed the door open and looked inside. It was empty and so was the rest of the house. Malik saw the statue of Jesus on the nightstand. He opened the dresser drawer and saw the kilos of cocaine. It was right where the caller said it would be.

“Jesus Isaiah.....we rich!” he said and held one of them up.

“How many?”

“Five....no wait six. Six kilos of coke. I can’t believe this. Malik carefully unwrapped one of the bags and tasted it. He had never tasted cocaine so pure and rich in his life.

“This is some good shit. Let’s see what else is in this house. Maybe there’s more.” said Malik.

They went through the house and closets. One of them was locked and Malik just left it alone. He thought it was a bust until Isaiah came walking into the room holding piles of cash.

“We hit the jackpot, brother. This place is a gold mine. There’s got to be thousands here.”

“You want to split?” asked Malik

“Hell no. We should keep looking. Maybe they didn’t want to keep all of it one place in case they got raided. Who knows what’s in those barns out back.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

They both stood next to the window and watched the van pull up to the house. Malik could see Soupee driving.

“I’m going to beat his ass until he turns white.”

“You didn’t take the keys with you?” asked Isaiah.

“I didn’t want them to be trapped here if things went to shit. Let’s find a bag or something. I don’t want those two to know what we got here.” said Malik.

Isaiah took off looking for a bag of some kind and Marlene and Soupee came into the house. Soupee held his little .38 in his hand, ready for action. As soon as he saw Malik, he knew he crewed up. Malik said nothing and just continued to stare at him.

“What?”

“I told you to stay put. You got to be the dumbest nigga I ever met.” said Malik.

“We were worried about you two. You were gone for over an hour. What did you find? Did you kill anybody?”

“No, we did not kill anybody. We didn’t find shit. Isaiah grabbed a few things from the house we might be able to pawn. He’s got them in a bag.”

Isaiah came in a moment later carrying a black suitcase.

“This was a total waste of time. Let’s get out of here.” he said.

The four of them walked out of the kitchen and into the living room past the staircase. It was Marlene that first noticed the pretty girl standing at the top of the stairs.

“Oh shit!” she said

The rest of them spun around and looked at the top of the stairs. Malik and Isaiah looked at one another. They were both thinking the same thing. This gold mine had just turned to shit. They were going to have to kill the girl. They just had to get Marlene and Soupee out first. There was no other way.

“Who are you?” asked Rose

“Just forget we were ever here honey. Just forget you ever saw us.” said Marlene.

“He’s not going to let you leave.....he won’t let you leave. You’ll be stuck here just like me and all the others.”

Malik raised his gun and aimed it right at her chest. Marlene grabbed it and pushed it away.

“The hell are you doing?”

“You want to be a little *thuette*, this is what you got to do. Sometimes you got to do some really nasty shit.” said Malik.

“You are not going to hurt that girl, Malik.” she said and ran up the stairs.

“Okay....Marlene Harris from Philadelphia...I won’t.” he said sarcastically.

“How you want to play this?” said Isaiah softly.

“Just get those two in the van. I’ll take care of her.” said Malik.

“My name’s is Marlene. Do you live in this house?”

“No.”

“Well, what are you doing here?”

Marlene noticed that this girl looked like she was in shock. She stunk like piss. Too bad, if she cleaned herself up, she could probably be very pretty.....and Marlene loved pretty white girls.”

“We have to get out of here before he comes back. We have to hurry.”

“What do you mean? Before who comes back?”

“The man who killed my boyfriend. He’s a very bad man.” said Rose.

Malik just rolled his eyes.

“Soupee start the van. We’re out of here.” he said.

Soupee ran outside. Malik walked up the stairs. He didn’t get any closer. The smell was enough o make him vomit.

“Girl, you stink. Ain’t you got no water in here?”

“I hid in the closet. I peed all over myself. I didn’t want to come out. I was afraid he might find me.”

“Afraid who might find you?”

“The bad man who owns this house. He’s a very bad man. A very evil man. He did some horrible things to my boyfriend Thomas....some very bad things.”

“So, it’s just one dude? One single man that did this?”

“No.....he’s not a man. Not a regular man anyway.”

“Malik. Something’s wrong here. She’s in shock.”

“Yeah Marlene, something is wrong here. We can’t leave her here and we can’t take her with us either. That only leaves us one choice. We don’t leave any witnesses.....I’m sorry lady. It’s just not your lucky day.” said Malik and aimed his gun at her chest.

“Malik.” said Soupee

“What?”

“The van won’t start.”

Malik and Isaiah looked at one another. Isaiah ran outside with Soupee.

Rose sat down on the steps and started to sob.

“He’s coming back. We’re all going to die.” she said, sobbing.

“Come on girl, get up.” he said and pulled her down the stairs. They walked outside to the van. Isaiah was trying to start the van. It was completely dead.

“I don’t know. Maybe the battery died or something.”

“Goddamn it. We got to get the van out of sight. One of us will have to walk back to the highway and try and make a call, get someone to come and get us.” said Malik.

“What about the van?”

“What about it? It’s not our van. It’s big Steve’s. If the cops find it, who cares. No one saw us take it. They can’t trace it back to us.” said Malik.

“What do you want to do with Snow White in there?”

“We got to find out what she knows. Get all the guns and ammo you can. I’ll help you push this thing into one of the barns.

The four of them pushed the van into the barn, while Rose steered. Soupee opened up one of the barn doors. Rose got out of the van and ran away from the barn.

“What the hell is the problem now?”

“I’m not going in there.....no way.” she said, backing away from the barn doors.

Malik pulled out his gun. He pushed open one of the barn doors and looked inside.

“Get me that flashlight.”

Soupee reached into the van and handed him the flashlight. He could see dozens of old cars and junk scattered everywhere. It was as if the barn was now a junkyard. He shined the light further up, on the

second floor. That's when he saw the bodies. Dozens of dead bodies hanging by their necks from the ceiling. Most were just rotted corpses.

"Brother.....what the fuck have we just stepped into here? What the hell is this place? Cause it sure as hell ain't no safe house."

"We got to get out of here. Even if we have to walk back to the highway. We're out of here."

"Malik, that ain't no plan. In case you forget, we have some serious merchandise in this bag. Four negroes just walking along the highway, carrying guns and holding drugs. We wouldn't make it a mile before some honkey cop was on us. Our only chance is to drive out of here."

"What the hell happened to all these people?" asked Isaiah.

"I don't know but, I do know I ain't going to be one of them. Let's go talk to the girl. I want to know what she knows." said Malik.

The four of them cornered Rose. Their intentions were made very clear. Now was not the time to hold back.

"Rose.....just tell us what happened." said Marlene.

"You guys.....you have no idea. This house is horrible." she said as she began to cry.

My boyfriend Thomas got the call one afternoon. He didn't even know who it was on the other end. He says he is a butterfly collector and that he found a colony of Lange's Metalmark in a creek behind this house. It's a very rare butterfly. Naturally Thomas was interested. The man says he saw his thesis paper in a publication with his email and phone number. Thomas was skeptical. He said that if he found this colony of butterflies, he could basically write his own ticket. The caller was friendly and gave him very detailed instructions. We looked up the address on our phones and found the house. It seemed so easy. We never thought anything was going to go wrong. We never thought anyone was luring us into a trap. We found the creek and the butterflies. Thomas was on cloud nine. He captured several of them and took some photos. I took a video of the colony. We parked at the old farmhouse. We didn't think anything of it. We tried to see if anyone was home but, the place was deserted. We didn't want to trespass but, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. We walked about a mile or so back to his jeep, only it wouldn't start. Yeah, we were pissed. Neither of us had cell service, zip, zero, nothing. We left all the butterflies and equipment in his jeep and were just going to walk back to the main highway.....only we couldn't get back to the highway.

"What do you mean you couldn't get back to the highway?" asked Malik

The dirt road just disappeared. Like it just ceased to exist and we were surrounded by fields and forests. We couldn't figure it out. We walked and walked for hours but, no matter where we went or which direction, we would always end up right back here at the house. It was getting dark and we could see the lights from the farmhouse. Someone had turned them on. It was getting cold and we couldn't stay outside, so we decided to spend the night in the old house. We were scared now, we knew something was very wrong. We should be able to see the highway or something. It was as if the house didn't want us to leave, like it had trapped us here. Thomas always carried a pistol in his jeep. It wasn't much but it was better than nothing. We figured we would be safe, as long as we had it. We got up the

next morning and found a pot of coffee was made and there was food on the table. We got really freaked out and just left. No matter how far we walked, we ended up right back here at the old farmhouse. We were scared and hungry. That afternoon, we found the bodies in the barn. We knew we were next. We just knew this house was going to kill us. Someone had stolen his jeep. It was gone. We went back inside the house and saw all this food on the table. We were so hungry we ate it. That night, the bad man came. He came for Thomas. He shot the man so many times, I don't know how he didn't kill him but, he didn't. The bad man did horrible things to him.....horrible things. I've never heard a human being scream so loud in my life. I had to cover my ears. Every time I close my eyes, I can still hear Thomas screaming. He's begging the bad man to just kill him. Just kill him and be done with it.

The four of them looked at one another. Malik and Isaiah weren't buying it. Soupee and Marlene were nervous.

"Uh.....what's your name?"

"Rose. Rose Harwood."

"Rose.....could you excuse us for a moment here, I just want to have a little talk with my people here." said Malik.

Rose turned away and walked back towards the house.

"Man.....she must think we're the dumbest bunch of niggas on the planet." said Malik.

"Malik, why would she make that up?" asked Marlene

"I don't know but, come on Marlene, you don't buy any of this shit do you?"

"I saw a new jeep in the barn, our van won't start either. I told you this was a mistake. We never should have come here."

"Yeah, well.....we're here now. I think we just walk back to the highway. Isaiah and I will get some help and we'll get out of here."

"You're not going to just leave us here are you?"

"I'll leave you one of my guns. Soupee has his little pea shooter as well. Ain't nothing going to happen to you. I just wish I knew what this girl's angle was. What the hell is she doing? She must know about the drugs and the money."

"I thought you said you didn't find anything, that this trip was a bust?" said Marlene.

"Yeah, that's what I meant.

Marlene rolled her eyes and walked away. Splitting up was not a good idea. There was always safety in numbers.

"Malik, we're going to have to spend the night in the house. It's going to be dark soon. We don't want to be out here at night."

He sat down on a large rock outside the barn. He didn't have many good options left. Four blacks walking along the highway were bound to draw attention. They could stash the bag and come back for it later but that would mean stashing the guns as well. They also had to return Big Steve's van to him as well, or give him something in exchange. Malik couldn't believe he was carrying around a gold mine with him and couldn't do a damn thing with it. He also had the little problem of what he was going to do with Isaiah. He would have to split it up fifty-fifty with him. If he was out of the picture, that would mean a whole lot of money for him. He figured Isaiah was thinking the same thing. Neither of them would do anything until they had a better handle on this situation. Not until they knew what they were facing. At some point, he was going to have to take care of Isaiah, before he took care of Malik.

"You think I'm lying to you.....don't you?" Rose asked Malik

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Well, I'm not. You'll see. You'll see I'm not lying."

"Rose.....one thing that doesn't make any sense here is: why on Earth would this haunted house let you live? Why would it kill your boyfriend but let you live?"

"Cause I'm not going anywhere. It let me live so that I can warn you all what's coming. It likes to play games. It wants to fuck with your head. I don't know. You have a lot of guns, maybe you can stop it.....but, Thomas tried and it didn't seem to do any good. I think that's what this horrible place is, just one big torture chamber."

"That's one hell of a story Rose, you got anything to back it up?"

"Thomas's jeep is in the barn. You want proof, go ahead, just try and leave. See how far you get." she said.

"See, the problem with your story is that we found a whole lot of drugs and money in this house. That kind of changes things." said Malik.

"It's just part of the game. It was rare butterflies for Thomas, for you it's drugs. Who knows what it told the rest of the people hanging in the barn. You saw all the bodies, yet you still don't want to believe me."

"Okay, I ain't going out there in the dark. Tomorrow morning, we're out of here."

"Sure.....if you say so." said Rose as she walked away.

"Man, that bitch needs to clean herself up." said Isaiah as he sat down next to Malik.

"What's our next move?"

"We spend the night in the house. Tomorrow morning, we stash the guns and drugs and get out of here. I still don't trust that girl." said Malik.

"Me neither."

“She’s a loose end.”

“So are Marlene and Soupee.”

“They ain’t going to say nothing.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that?”

“You saying we gotta smoke them?”

“I’m saying we need to plan our next move very carefully. One mistake and we could miss out on the chance of a lifetime. I’m tired to being a poor nigger Malik. I’m tired of living in the projects. Tired of shoveling other people’s shit. It ain’t no kind of a life. I got two baby mommas. I don’t want my kids to live this life. Hell, I’m almost forty years old and I’ve never even owned a car. Being poor isn’t living. It’s just waiting for death.” he said.

Malik had never seen this side of Isaiah before. In the hood, he was just another stone cold killer. He’d shoot you for just looking at him the wrong way.

It occurred to him that if he was going to drop Isaiah, this was the perfect place to do it. Out here in the middle of nowhere, away from everyone. If he killed him in the hood, there was bound to be questions. He had a lot of friends who would want revenge. He would have Marlene and Soupee to back up his story. He couldn’t kill them because he needed them. Old Malik would have just shot them all and taken off with the drugs and money. He was older and wiser now. He didn’t have some honkey boogeyman to worry about. He had to watch Isaiah.....*cause that brother was thinking the same thing he was.*

It was dark outside. They were all huddled inside the old farmhouse trying to stay warm. There was food and drinks in the kitchen. Nothing fancy but, it would work. Somebody was living here, that much was for certain. Malik figured the owners were just watching them, waiting for them to lower their guard. Waiting for the right moment to strike.

Isaiah kept the duffle bag in his sights at all times. Malik pretended like he didn’t notice. They all ate in silence. Soupee ate four pieces of pie, while Marlene ate a box of crackers. Malik took out his smokes and lit it up. He had to get some answers from Rose. Her story just didn’t add up. None of this added up. He spent an hour trying to get the van started but it was toast. He even tried jump starting the battery with the battery from Thomas’s jeep, still nothing. Hell of a time for the van to die. The one time he needed that van to start, it wouldn’t. He almost wanted to burn the damn thing just to teach Big Steve a lesson, even if he had stolen it from him in the first place.

“Rose.....I’m going to give you one last chance to tell us the truth. I don’t like games and I think you’re playing games with us.” he said and put his 9mm on the table.

“I’m not lying to you. We’re all going to die. That’s the end of the story.” she said as she ate her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“Come on Rose. Why can’t you just be honest with us. See, the big flaw in your story, is that if this house was really evil and there was some monster just waiting to kill us, then why would he have let you live? He kills your boyfriend but, just lets you live? That don’t make no sense.”

“Maybe the man don’t kill girls.” said Soupee.

“Or maybe there is no bad man to begin with. See, I think you were left here to spy on us. See what we got. See how many guns we have. I know you’re a part of this Rose. I’m giving you one last chance to come clean.” he said picking up his gun.

“Malik.....or whatever the hell your name is. Let me ask you something: when you drove up to this house, did you see any power lines, or telephone poles?”

“No but, then again, I wasn’t really looking for them either.”

“Right, so if there aren’t any power lines, or primary transformers, or solar generators, or even regular generators to provide power.....*then how the hell do we have any power?*”

The rest of the group looked at one another. It was a very good question.

“There’s got to be one around here, we just didn’t see it.” said Isaiah.

“There’s no power lines coming into this house. Try and figure that one out.” said Rose.

“Maybe it’s underground.”

“Do you know how much it costs to bury a power line? It’s a small fortune. No way would the power company do that for a dump like this place.” said Rose.

Marlene and Soupee looked over at Malik. He didn’t have any answers for them.

“It won’t matter. None of us will be alive for much longer anyway. You want to shoot me, go ahead. At least the bad man won’t be able to torture me, like he did to Thomas.”

“We all take turns on watch tonight. Four of us, we take two hour turns. Don’t fall asleep.” said Malik.

“Malik, I ain’t getting up in the middle of the night to just watch the corn grow.” said Isaiah

“Fine....I’ll stay up. I got a feeling we gonna have company. Guess I’ll have to just save all of us myself.”

“Let them come. We’re ready.”

“Thomas thought his little pistol was going to save us too.” said Rose.

“He just didn’t have a big enough gun. This little baby here will blow a man in half.” said Isaiah, holding up his shotgun.

“Yeah.....mine will too.” said Soupee flashing his little snub nose for the rest of the table to see.

Everyone went to bed but no one was sleeping. The mood in the house was somber and tense. Everyone was waiting for something horrible to happen. Rose knew she was going to die. She had

accepted it. She couldn't believe the rest of these idiots actually thought they were going to make it out of this thing alive. The house was alive. It fed off their energy. She had no idea what real evil was until just a few days ago. She and Thomas had stepped right into the Twilight Zone, only there was no happy ending here. This is where people came to die. She didn't know when it was coming but it was coming soon. The bad man would come and take who he wanted, then leave the rest of them to fight among themselves. She only saw a quick glimpse of him. He was a massive man wearing a pillowcase over his head. He was carrying a sickle. He was like something right out of a horror movie. Thomas told her to run and she did. She heard him firing and firing over and over. She didn't know if there was just one, or many more. She didn't know how many would come. Maybe they were inside the house, watching them and waiting. Sipping coffee and just waiting for the right moment to strike. The house and somehow fixed itself. There should have been bullet holes everywhere. There should have been blood everywhere. It was a crime scene, yet she found nothing. None of these people had any idea what had happened. This house should not exist. They were in some kind of parallel world now. One that the house controlled.

It was like a haunted house on steroids. Even ghosts were afraid of his place.

Malik looked out the window. He looked at his watch. It was one AM. He was having a hard time staying awake. He lit up another cigar and took a puff. He needed some sleep or he wasn't going to be much use to anyone if the shit hit the fan. Soupee walked over to him and they both looked out the window. They had turned all the lights off and the room was almost completely dark.

"You see anything out there?" he asked.

"Nope." answered Malik.

"I know you guys got some shit in that bag. You planning on sharing it with us?"

"Nope."

"Damn Malik, Marlene and I are right here in this shit with you and you won't even give us a piece of the action?"

"I'll take care of you guys. We just got to get out of this place first."

"Yeah right." said Soupee as he held his snub nose in his hand.

"I don't like this place Malik. It ain't no place for a brother. Something just ain't right about this house. I think some real bad shit went down here. You can almost feel it."

"Ain't no worse than any housing project in the hood."

"Come on man, you can almost feel it on your skin. This house has some kind of weird energy. I felt it as soon as I stepped inside. Makes your skin crawl."

"Ghosts don't kill people Soupee, people kill people. I ain't afraid of something that can't kill me, I'm afraid of people."

"We are leaving here in the morning, right?"

“Yeah. We’ll have to come back for the van later. You and your sister need to be cool. We’re bound to get stopped by someone, so you better get your stories straight. I always assume the cops will be questioning me, so I make sure my story is tight. Not one they can pick apart in two minutes.” said Malik.

He turned away from the window and sat down on the old recliner. He needed some sleep. It had been a very long day.

“Watch the window for a while. I’m gonna close my eyes for a minute.” he said and sat back in the chair.

Soupee was exhausted himself but he didn’t want to piss off Malik. He knew Isaiah kept that bag with him at all times. He also knew Isaiah had a little thing for Marlene....or maybe it was the other way around. He watched him go into the bedroom where she was sleeping. He also knew Isaiah could not be trusted, especially in a situation like this. He was playing his hand carefully. He was just waiting for Malik and Isaiah to off one another and he would keep the bag. No one would ever know. He’d be the king of the neighborhood back home. Maybe he needed to just give them a little push in order to make that happen. He saw a figure coming down the stairs. Isaiah came up to him and woke up Malik.

“I caught that little bitch talking on her phone. She was talking to somebody.”

“What?” asked Malik getting out of the chair.

“Yeah, I couldn’t hear what she was saying but she was definitely talking to someone. I went to take a piss and heard her in the hallway.”

“I knew it.” said Malik. The three of them ran up the stairs. Rose met them at the top of the stairs. They just looked at one another for a second before Rose spoke.

“I got a hold of my brother. I told him what had happened. He’s on his way out here right now to come and get us.” she said holding her phone.

“So what, your phone suddenly started working after all this time?”

“I charged it and made a call. All we got to do is stay alive until he and his crew get here and we’re good.” she said.

“His crew?”

“Yeah, I told him what happened. He said he was going to get all the firepower he could and would be on his way.”

Malik and Isaiah looked uncomfortably at one another. They walked back down the stairs.

“The hell we going to do now?”

“We smoke that bitch. She’s been lying to us since the moment we found her.”

“I know.”

“Time to go all *old school nigger* on her ass.” he said and walked back up the stairs.

They walked up to the room where she was sleeping and opened the door. She was sitting on the bed pointing a gun at them. Malik dove backwards, out of the way. He shut the door.

“Soupee.....get your ass outside. Make sure she don’t go nowhere.” he whispered.

“I found Thomas’s gun. I got four rounds left.....who wants one?” she said from the bedroom.

“The fuck are we going to do now?” asked Isaiah.

“That gas station we passed on our way here. How far do you think it was from the house?”

“I don’t know.....ten maybe fifteen miles from here.”

“We meet there. We’re going to split up. If anyone makes it out of here alive, we get all the people we can and come back here.” said Malik.

“What about this?” asked Isaiah holding up the bag.

“We got to leave it for right now. Just put the bag in a closet or something.”

“You cray?”

“We ain’t got no choice. We get stopped carrying that bag and we’re done. It don’t do us no good right now. We’ll come back for it later.”

“Sorry bro, but that ain’t a good plan. I’ll take the bag with me. I’ll take my chances.”

“We leave it here. That way, no one gets screwed.”

“We got enough money in here to retire for the rest of our lives and you just want to leave it here?”

“You get popped carrying that bag, we’ll lose it forever. Then no one will get it. This way we still got a good chance. It isn’t lost. Isaiah use your fucking brain, you know you won’t make it a mile before some pig stops you and looks in that bag.” said Malik.

Isaiah knew Malik was right. They had the keys to the kingdom but they couldn’t take it with them.

“We got to get out of here before anyone else shows up. She knows about the drugs, she has to. We leave it here, someone else is going to just take it. We got to kill her.”

“I know. I’m trying.” said Malik.

He opened the door just a little bit. The bullet ripped right through the door and went through the wall in the hallway. Malik stumbled back and fired several times into the door, as did Isaiah. He was on his back and kicked open the door and fired several rounds into the room. There was a few minutes of

silence before Isaiah poked his head inside. He could see Rose's body laying on the floor. He shot her once in the leg. She never moved. He motioned to Malik and the both of them stood over her dead body. They could see a pool of blood on the floor underneath her corpse. She had been shot right in the throat.

"I think I know what happened. Lets go have a look at that jeep in the barn.

Soupee was at the top of the stairs, shaking so badly, he could hardly control himself. Marlene opened the bedroom door and poked her head out.

"Make sure she's dead Soupee. Watch the house. Come her Marlene." he said and pulled her out of the bedroom.

They walked out back to the barn and opened the barn door. Malik found the light switch and turned on the lights. There were dozens of vehicles in the old barn. He walked over to Thomas's jeep and looked inside.

"What are we looking for?" asked Marlene.

"That gun she had was a fucking Glock. Only gang bangers carry a Glock. *Looking for butterflies my black ass.*

He opened the jeep door and looked inside. There were no butterfly cages or butterflies. They did find something else though. Another Glock and several loaded magazines.

"She was after the drugs, just like we were. Maybe she got greedy and killed her dude, maybe she panicked when she heard us come in, I don't know. I do know that bitch wasn't out here collecting no damn butterflies, that's for damn sure."

"So then, who did she call?"

"I don't know but, we got to expect them. We got to be waiting for them."

"You're sure none of these cars will start?" asked Marlene.

"I tried all of them. They won't start."

"Malik.....look at this. I saw it earlier but I didn't really look at it." said Marlene as she handed him a receipt from inside the van.

It was an invoice for a new fuel pump from a garage. Big Steve had taken it in to have it looked at because it was having problems starting. The mechanic wrote that if it wasn't fix, it would die and the van wouldn't be able to start. He got picked up the next day and the van just sat in his yard.

"Shit.....we stole a bad car. Figures. I should have known not to trust Big Steve. Well, that's one big mystery solved. You guys still think this house is haunted? I didn't think so."

Malik knew he had been played. He just had to find out who made that call. Who was on the other end talking to him? Who else did they call? He knew he had to make some very unpleasant choices very

soon. Was he going to kill Isaiah? What was he going to do with Marlene and Soupee? Being a thug and living the thug life means you got to be willing to do things most other people won't do. If he could just get Isaiah alone, he could end it and be done with him. He couldn't do anything with the other two, he needed them to back up his story. He came up with a plan. Not a very good one but one that might work.

He'd have to wait until the crackers showed up at the farm. He'd start shooting at them. They would shoot back. In the middle of all the shooting, he'd pop Isaiah when the other two weren't looking. Grab the bag and get out of there. He'd have to hide it before he reached the highway. He just wasn't certain as to what he was going to do with Marlene and Soupee. He could handle a few crackers with guns.....but, only if it was a few. Too many gunshots was bound to draw the attention of the cops. He couldn't show back up in the neighborhood by himself with money and drugs....alone. They all had family and friends. Someone would rat him out to the cops. He needed at least one of them alive.....didn't matter which one.

They walked back to the farmhouse. Malik was going over every conceivable scenario in his mind. He couldn't kill Isaiah yet. He didn't know how many honkies were going to show up. Marlene and Soupee would be useless if the shit hit the fan. Some of the scariest killers he had ever met in prison were white boys. Not the *Melrose Place* kind of white people. The other kind, the kind that didn't take too kindly to people like him.

They all sat down in the living room in silence. Malik was out of smokes. Soupee reached over and handed him one.

"Malik, there's a dead girl upstairs. What are we going to do with her?" asked Marlene.

"I don't know. You want to bury her, go ahead."

"I didn't kill her.....you did."

"Marlene, she was just waiting for the right moment to kill us. Even you can see that." said Isaiah.

"Malik.....it's over. We lost. We got the drugs. Let's just get out of here. Get away from this terrible place. I know if we don't get out of here, we'll wind up just like her." said Marlene.

"Marlene, I'm thinking, just shut up."

They were all suddenly startled when they heard a phone ring. Malik jumped backwards and nearly fell off the couch. He looked over at the old phone. He hadn't seen one like that in years. It looked like the kind of phone his grandmother used to have in her apartment. It just kept ringing and ringing. Malik reached over and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said softly.

"Malik.....how are you?" said the caller. He recognized the voice. It was the same person who had called him two days ago.

"I guess I could be a little better." he said nervously.

“Malik.....the terms and conditions of our agreement have not been met. I have given you multiple opportunities and you have failed. You get the cash and drugs and you are to kill the person who shot DuQuon, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. The only one in the house was that Rose girl. She’s dead. What am I missing?”

“Malik, Rose didn’t shoot DuQuon.”

“So then who did?”

“Malik.....you haven’t figured it out by now? Goodness, I guess I’ll have to draw you a map.....Malik.....*The person who killed your cousin is in the house with you right now.*” the caller said coldly.

“Huh?” he replied.

“I expect you to handle your business accordingly. My patience is wearing thin. Don’t let me down.” said the caller.

Malik hung up the phone. He looked at every one of them. He immediately suspected Isaiah but, he had no real proof.

The plot had thickened and thickened quickly.

“What did they say?” asked Marlene.

“They said the person who shot DuQuon is right here in the room with me.”

Everyone in the room suddenly looked very worried. They knew Malik and knew he wouldn’t hesitate to squeeze the trigger.....*no matter who you were.*

“Wait....some stranger calls you and says his killer is in this room and you believe him? Man, what is wrong with you Malik? Can’t you see this guy is playing us? He’s pulling your strings, getting you to do his dirty work.” said Marlene

“What if he’s not lying?”

“What if he is?” asked Isaiah.

“Where the hell were you the night he got shot?” asked Malik looking over at Isaiah.
“I was with somebody.”

“Sure you were.”

“Malik, he was with me all night. We sure as hell didn’t shoot him.” said Marlene.

He looked over at Soupee, who got very nervous.

“I didn’t kill DuQuon. Come on, that’s crazy. He was my boy.” he said nervously.

“So, where were you when he was shot?”

“At my house, playing XBOX and getting high. Same damn thing I do every night.”

“Why would that guy lie to me?” asked Malik.

“He’s playing some sick game with us, Malik. We got to get out of here while we still can. Who knows who else is going to show up here.”

“She’s right man. There’s just too many unknowns here for my liking.” said Isaiah.

“He found me once. I’m sure he can do it again. If we leave here without finding DuQuon’s killer, it won’t end well for us.”

“How does this guy know so much about DuQuon? Why does he even care who killed him?” asked Isaiah.

“I don’t know. I wish I did. Might make sense of this whole thing.” said Malik.

“Malik.....if we don’t get out here, we’re going to die. Leave the drugs and money and let’s just walk out of here and continue living our lives.” said Marlene.

“I wish I could. See Marlene, DuQuon told me something a few nights before he was killed. I just can’t get it out of my head.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he was going over to your place. He wasn’t going over there to cook dinner either.”

“Damn Malik, we were just hanging out, that’s all. He wanted to help out with the bills. I ain’t going to say no.”

“See, I think you was playing him. I think you and Isaiah shot him and kept the drugs and money. I think you’re going to do the same to me, that’s why you’re both here.”

“Malik, you’re crazy. I never even had sex with him.” said Marlene

“No girl.....*you just fucked him in other ways, didn’t you?*” he said

Soupee emptied his pistol. Only one of the shots hit Malik. It tore off his ear. It was over in seconds. Soupee was looking at Malik, holding a gun with no bullets in it.

Malik shot him three times in the chest. Marlene screamed and dove for cover. Isaiah shot Malik several times. He managed to get off two rounds, one of which hit Isaiah right in the groin. He fell to the floor and started screaming. Malik could feel the blood leaving his body. He was having a hard time standing up. He tried chasing Marlene but kept falling down. He was in bad shape. He was going to need a miracle to get out of this one alive. Somehow she had gotten a hold of Isaiah’s gun. She walked up behind Malik and shot him in the back of the head. She ran over to Isaiah. He was screaming and holding his nuts. They both looked at one another.

"Please baby.....please." he whispered.

"Isaiah...I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm pregnant with our baby. I don't want my baby to grow up without a father." she said with tears rolling down his face.

Isaiah began to laugh. It was a painful laugh at first, then he overcame the pain and was now laughing so hard, he was coughing blood.

"You dumb whore." he said between laughs.

"What?" asked Marlene confused.

"I can't have any kids. I had a vasectomy two years ago. Didn't want any more child support payments. You know that kid ain't mine."

Marlene had stopped crying. She stood up and stood over Isaiah. She was angry.....hurt and angry. The father of her baby just laughed at her when she told him it was his baby. He told her to get an abortion.

"You can take the girl out of the hood but, you ain't taking the hood out of the girl." he said trying to smile.

She shot him right through the head. She walked over to the duffle bag and looked inside. Suddenly, her future became a whole lot brighter. She had never seen so much money in her life. It felt as if she were dreaming. She didn't want this dream to end.

She was startled by hearing the old phone ring. She hadn't seen a phone like this ever, only in the movies. It had a cord attached to it. She picked it up and held it to her ear.

"Marlene.....you have made quite a mess of things." said the caller.

"Who are you?"

"Who I am is none of your concern. You only need to be concerned about what I can do for you. You've played the game well but came away empty handed. Would you like another chance?"

"Game? Is that what this is to you? Just a sick game?"

"Marlene.....I did nothing. I didn't shoot anyone, you did. You and your little gang are quite the pack of blood thirsty devils, aren't you?"

"Fuck you!"

"Now dear, there's no reason to get personal. I'll make a deal with you. Since everything you did was

recorded, I'm willing to let you play the game again. I'm willing to let you walk away with all the money you can fit in that little bag you're holding. You and your baby will be set for life."

"What if I say no?"

"Well then, you can spend the rest of your life in prison? How's that sound?"

"You are one sick old man."

"So, what's it going to be? Prison food and lesbian sex for the rest of your life, or living like one of the *Real Housewives*?"

"What do I have to do?"

"All you have to do is survive. Be the last person standing and the money is yours. You win it all. No questions asked. No cops ever get involved."

"All I have to do is survive?"

"That's all. You're quite a big hit with our fans. They're really pulling for you." said the caller.

"Fans?"

"Why yes. Everything you've done has been recorded. It's sort of like a TV program.....*for a very select audience and you're the star of the show.*" said the caller.

"All I have to do is be the last person left alive and I win? No tricks or bullshit?" she asked.

"You've come this far.....why walk away now? Why walk away when it could all be yours."

"Who shot DuQuon?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

"Who shot him?"

"Malik shot him. All for a few hundred dollars. I can show you the video if you want to see it."

"You mean it was him. This whole time it was him? No way."

"He wasn't very good at this game. Neither was Rose. That's why they're both dead."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Marlene watched Rose's brother and his boys get out their trucks. She could see they were all armed. What's a redneck without a gun? She was hiding in the barn. She knew she had to plan her next move very quickly. The clean up crew had done an amazing job in such a short amount of time. It didn't look like anything had happened. The house looked the same as it did when she first stepped inside. She counted five of them. Five honkies was all that stood between her and her money. Between her and happiness. Between her future and no future. She had her gun, but she was badly outgunned by the

rednecks. What's a girl from the projects to do?

Cause anyone who says money can't buy happiness has never held fifty thousand dollars in cash in their hands. Money doesn't buy happiness, it buys power.....and she'll take powerful any day over being happy.