

Two couples, two unhappy spouses--one shocking solution. . .

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<CN>Prologue

<OT>I wish I could have taken a picture of the look on Johnny's face when I pulled out my gun and aimed it between his eyes. But then again, I didn't need a picture because that sweet memory will be etched on my brain for the rest of my life. And besides, a photograph would be evidence, and after the time and effort I put into planning this son of a bitch's murder, the last thing I need on my phone is a picture of a dead man.

Usually when someone shows up at a person's doorstep late at night, a booty call is more than likely on the agenda. But because there's no way in hell that was the case between us, Johnny knew right away that this visit wasn't going to end well. I was actually surprised that he opened the door once he realized that it was me standing there, but then again, too much alcohol can make a person do things they normally wouldn't. He smelled of liquor and he could barely keep his balance.

"What're you doing here?" he asked, slurring his words.

They say that the eyes are the window to the soul, and I believe that to be true. From the moment we looked into each other's eyes, Johnny knew that I came here tonight to kill him.

We stared at each other for what felt like a long time, but was only a brief minute. His eyes said he was sorry for what he'd done to me, and to a host of other people, too. But my eyes told him that I didn't give a damn about his remorse, and after what happened a week ago today,

he had to have known that he was going to have to pay for his sins. I guess that's why he opened the door for me in the first place.

He quickly sobered up when I pointed my gun between his eyes, and that's when he allowed the reality of what was about to happen to sink in. He didn't put up resistance. He didn't fight. And he didn't plead for his life. He did none of the things I thought he would do, and I was glad because that made my job easier. The bastard actually helped me by taking a few steps back into the kitchen, eliminating the need for me to drag his body out of plain sight once I did what I came to do.

I didn't want to prolong this because I knew I had a set amount of time to get in and get out. But I also wanted to enjoy this moment, savor it, and swallow the sweet taste of revenge. However, I had to use my head, otherwise all my planning would go right down the drain, and I'd end up in jail. I couldn't let that happen, so I lowered my gun to Johnny's chest and smiled as I pulled the trigger.

<CN>Chapter 1

<CT>Geneva

<OT>If there was one thing Geneva Mayfield had learned in the five years, two months, and twenty-two days she'd been married to Johnny, it was that she knew straight away when he was telling a lie.

A slight hesitation in his velvety smooth voice, a subtle shift in his deep brown eyes, or a placid expression framing his thick, kissable lips were all telltale signs for Geneva that her husband wasn't being truthful. Over the last six months, to her disappointment, he'd added

another move to that growing list of signals, and that was the art of avoidance, which he was exercising tonight.

Who does he think he's fooling? Geneva said to herself. Her husband's shenanigans, along with the humidity clinging to the stifling Alabama heat, had frayed the edges of her nerves.

For the last ten years, she'd braced herself each summer for the unrelenting heat that covered the town of Amber, Alabama, practically smothering its residents. She was one of the thousands of African Americans who'd completed the reverse migration to the south—by way of Chicago—in search of a slower pace and more affordable standard of living. She loved Amber because it provided her with the best of both worlds.

With a population of just over 90,000 residents, Amber was small enough to provide a homey feel, but not so small that everyone knew everybody. And given that it was a quaint suburb situated not far from Birmingham, the largest city in the state, Amber attracted business professionals, entrepreneurs, and small companies, which contributed to its growing affluence.

If he thinks I'm letting this one go, he's out of his mind, Geneva quietly seethed. She knew she should've put an end to Johnny's lies several months ago when he'd started feeding her spoonfuls of half-truths. But now that he was boldly pouring lies down her throat, it had become too much to swallow.

As she stood at one end of the couch staring at Johnny, who was reclined on the opposite end, pretending to be transfixed by the sports announcer on ESPN, Geneva was becoming more upset by the minute. She was disturbed and confused about a lot of things that had been happening in her marriage, and she couldn't figure out what had brought about the change. She was still as attentive to Johnny as she had been the day they'd married. She still put time and care into her personal appearance, making sure she looked fashionably chic on his arm. She still

cooked delicious meals, kept the house meticulously clean, and made sure she supported him in everything he ventured to do in both his career and personal life.

Geneva knew she was a good wife and helpmate, and as her best friend and coworker, Donetta Pierce, had told her, a hell of a catch. “Most men would love to have a fly, smart, dutiful wife like you by their side,” Donetta often said. But for some meritless reason that Geneva couldn’t explain, Johnny acted as though he couldn’t care less about her or their marriage. And again, Geneva didn’t know what to make of the current state that she and her husband were in. But there was one thing she was sure of, and was willing to bet her life on, and it was that her husband was up to no good.

“Johnny, did you hear a word I just said?” Geneva asked.

“Unfortunately, yes I did.”

She took a deep breath. “Why’re you talking to me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you have absolutely no respect, care, or concern for me. Like I’m some person on the street, instead of your wife.”

“I answered your question, didn’t I?” Johnny said with annoyance. “You’re so dramatic.”

Geneva shook her head. She knew she was many things, but dramatic certainly wasn’t one of them. If anything, she knew that her meek, often reserved manner could stand a tune-up, and tonight was the perfect time to start. She placed her hand at the top of her slim but curvy hip. “I can see that you have an attitude tonight, but just so you know, that’s not gonna stop me from getting to the bottom of why you haven’t answered my question.”

“We’ve been through this already and I don’t feel like rehashing it,” he said without so much as a glance in her direction. “Now can you please stop with the interrogation and let me watch the game highlights in peace.”

Geneva folded her slender arms across her chest and took deep breaths in her attempt to calm herself. Johnny’s behavior had gone from troublesome to alarming, almost overnight. At first it had been subtle: a missed phone call here, an unanswered text there, or a hurried reply message sent hours after she’d originally contacted him. But she’d chalked it up to the pressures and busy schedule that went along with growing his real estate and property management company. However, over the last two months things had worsened, and now their marriage was unraveling like a bundle of yarn.

It seemed as though he flat-out didn’t care about her at all, which was apparent by the laissez-faire attitude he now demonstrated in the way he treated her.

Two weeks ago Geneva had waited inside Frank’s Auto Repair for more than two hours before Donetta finally came to pick her up, all because Johnny had forgotten that she’d needed a ride home while her car was in the shop. Then last Monday she’d waited at the fertility clinic all alone, hoping and praying that he’d change his mind and join her for a consultation with a specialist that had taken her several weeks to arrange. But to her extreme disappointment she’d had to sit through the visit without him. And now tonight, she was bubbling over with hurt because the romantic dinner she’d prepared especially for him, complete with candles, fresh flowers, soft music, and fine china, had gone cold and untouched, the result of him walking casually into the house nearly four hours after she’d told him to come home early because she had a surprise for him.

“I won’t continue to be ignored and disrespected,” Geneva said, infusing bass into her voice to signal she meant business. “This little game you’re playing needs to end right now.” She walked over to where Johnny was sitting, leaned over, picked up the remote that was lying beside him, and pressed the power button.

“What the hell?” Johnny said with surprise. “Woman, what’s wrong with you?” Although his words were short and abrupt, his voice and tone was calm, and he never took his eyes off the screen. “Turn it back on, Geneva.”

“Not until you answer my question.”

“You’re pushing it.”

“And you’re full of it!” Geneva spat out angrily, which was counter to her normally laid-back, even-tempered demeanor.

The sharpness in her voice got Johnny’s attention, prompting him to finally turn his eyes to hers. “Why’re you trippin?”

“You have some nerve asking me that! I can’t believe you,” Geneva said. She was so upset she was nearly trembling. “I left the salon early, went to the grocery store across town, and bought a ton of food. Then I rushed home and cooked and baked all afternoon, just so I could make your favorite meal. All I asked you to do was come home at a decent hour because I wanted us to enjoy a good meal and a quiet evening together like we used to. But could you do that? *Nooooo!* You drug in here ten minutes ago acting like everything is fine when you know good and doggone well it’s not.”

Geneva was pissed off and at this point she didn’t care if Johnny knew it, and in fact she wanted him to know just how upset she was.

From the first day they'd met, Johnny had called all the shots and had basically set the tone for their relationship, while Geneva had acquiesced at every turn because she wanted to please him and make him happy. But now she regretted ever taking the first step down a path that was destined for bumps and roadblocks. It was times like this when she knew she should've listened to the advice that both her late mother and Donetta had given her when she'd first started dating Johnny six years ago.

"Baby, don't sit around takin' his mess for too long 'cause before you know it, you'll be layin' down under his foot of demands, and you won't be able to get back up," her mother had told her. Donetta's advice had been more blunt and to the point. "You need to teach that Negro a damn lesson and let his ass know that God didn't stop handin' out dicks when He made Johnny's. Let that fool know that if he acts up, you can get another one just like him, and without the attitude."

Johnny leaned further back into the couch as he spoke. "Geneva, I don't know who you think you're talking to, but..."

Geneva cut him off midsentence. "I know exactly who I'm talking to... a married man who stays out past midnight five days a week. A man who barely speaks to his wife, and when he does decide to say something, it's laced with sarcasm. And last but most certainly not least, I'm talking to a man who is neglecting his marriage and his home."

"I take care of my responsibilities."

"Now I have to ask you who do you think you're talking to?" she said, looking surprised. "You and I both know that what you just said isn't true."

“I pay almost every bill that passes through that door. I make sure you don’t want for anything. I get out there and bust my ass, hustling every day to make a comfortable life for you. Do you know how many women would love to trade places with you?”

Geneva narrowed her eyes. “I’m not concerned about what other women want. This is about me and you.”

“All I’m saying is, I handle mine.”

“Paying bills and paying attention to your wife are two very different things.”

“I don’t care what you say. I can name ten women right now who’d jump as high as the moon if their man was holding things down financially like I do.”

“I can pay my own bills. I lived independently before I married you. I didn’t need you financially back then, and the same is true right now. But what I can’t and won’t do is continue to be neglected and lied to.”

Johnny shook his head. “I haven’t lied to you.”

“You must think I’m a fool. There aren’t that many late evening meetings in the world. And who’s showing houses at ten, eleven, and twelve o’clock at night anyway?”

Johnny raised his hands in the air. “Here we go with that shit again. Most women would be happy if they had a man who worked his fingers to the bone day and night so he can—”

“Forget about what most women want,” Geneva interrupted. “I’m telling you what I need.” But Johnny was on a roll and continued talking as though she’d never said a word.

“Provide for her and make sure she never had to struggle. But not Queen Geneva,” he said, staring hard at her. “All you’re concerned about is what time I come home, who I’ve been talking with, and how many meetings I’ve had. This bullshit is getting old.”

Geneva ignored his remarks like he'd just done hers. "Tell me where you really were tonight."

Johnny took a long sigh. "I already told you. I was showing a property to a couple who just had a baby and want to upgrade to a bigger house. Late night is the only free time they have in their busy schedule, and being the professional I am, I accommodated them."

"Yeah, right. Who, or shall I say, what else, are you accommodating?"

Johnny smirked. "You're trying to get a rise out of me, but I'm not gonna let you do it. Now turn the TV back on," he said casually.

"Why're you acting like nothing's wrong?"

"Because it's not. Now for the last time, turn the damn TV back on."

Geneva couldn't understand how Johnny could possibly believe his behavior was acceptable, that is, unless he knew it wasn't. Maybe this was his way of turning the tables to make it seem as though he was a hardworking man trying to build his business, and his unreasonable wife couldn't understand or appreciate him. But whatever mind game he was trying to play, Geneva knew she couldn't let up, not this time. And no matter how much Johnny protested, she was going to get answers. She needed them. "I still don't understand why you couldn't call me back," Geneva said. "If you were really showing a property, you could have called me on the way there, or better yet, before you left, so I would know you'd be running late."

Just then Johnny's cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen and answered the call before it could ring again. "What's up, man," he said in his deep baritone.

Geneva watched intently as Johnny held the phone close to his ear. She could see his thumb pressing the volume key on the side of his smartphone, adjusting the sound level to a volume so low that Geneva couldn't hear what was being said on the other end.

"Okay, yeah, I can leave," Johnny said into the phone as he stood and walked over to the hook near the door and removed his keys from it. "I got your back. I'll be there..."

Geneva cut him off midsentence. "Who're you talking to and where are you going?"

"Bernard," Johnny whispered, covering the phone with his hand. "He's having some issues with Candace again. He needs somebody to talk to."

"I don't believe you." Quicker than Johnny could blink, Geneva walked up to him and took the phone out of his hand. "Who is this?" she asked in a hostile tone.

"Um, hey, Geneva. It's Bernard. How you doin' this evening?"

Geneva's eyes hit the floor, and she wished she could undo her bold move. "Oh, hi, Bernard. I um, I'm sorry I interrupted your conversation."

Johnny grabbed the phone back out of her hand. "Man, I'm sorry about that. I'm leaving the house now and I'll see you when I get there."

Get where? To his house? To a bar? Geneva wanted to ask where he was going but she was too embarrassed. She felt bad about what she had just done, and she knew that Johnny was furious.

"See, this is what I'm talkin' about," Johnny snarled. "I work hard, I pay the bills, and I take care of my family and friends. I'm a responsible brother tryin' to do the right thing. But all you can do is nag, complain, and accuse me of shit I'm not even doing. Well, you know what, Geneva," he said, letting out a deep, frustrated breath, "since I'm getting accused of all sorts of things, I might as well go out and make good on some of them."

Johnny slipped on his loafers, retrieved his wallet from the counter, and headed toward the door. “Don’t wait up.” And with that, he was gone.

Geneva walked toward the front window and watched the taillights of Johnny’s SUV as he sped down their street. He’d said he was going to meet his friend Bernard, but he didn’t say where, or what time he’d be back. “I can’t take too much more of this,” she said aloud.

Twenty minutes later Geneva slipped under the cool, freshly laundered sheets she’d put on the bed only hours earlier—when she’d been anticipating a tantalizing romp after a romantic meal with her husband. But instead she was lying on her Egyptian cotton sheets all alone, and it was becoming a regular occurrence. As Geneva stared up at the ceiling, her mind replayed the interaction she’d had with Johnny. Even though she’d heard Bernard’s voice on the phone, she wasn’t convinced that the call was on the up-and-up. She didn’t want to admit it, and she’d been fighting the reality for a few months, but now she had to face what she feared. Her husband was involved with another woman.

Tears streamed from Geneva’s eyes. She felt alone and unwanted, and she knew this couldn’t continue. Her marriage was on the brink of dissolving right before her eyes, and as she cried until her lids felt tired, she knew that their argument tonight was just the tip of the iceberg to come.