

CHAPTER ONE EXCERPT FOR GONNA LAY DOWN MY BURDENS

Chapter One

January 2001

I had just stepped out of my hot shower when a mysterious gust of ice-cold air blew against the left side of my face and made me shiver.

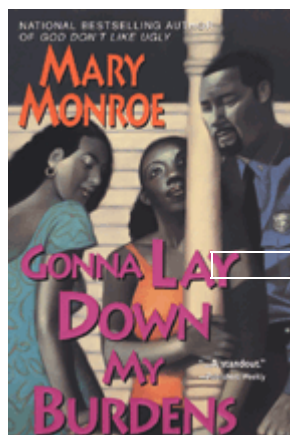
The small window above my shower, covered in steam, was closed, and it was warmer than normal for Alabama this time of year. There was no explanation for what had just happened to me. Looking back on it now, I think of it as the wind of misfortune that blew into my life that night. But even before that night, I had already lost my way.

Still shivering, I stumbled toward my living room, a large towel in one hand, my pink terry-cloth bathrobe in the other. My wet hair felt like vines against the sides of my face as I wrestled myself into the bathrobe, clutching the towel between my teeth, then wrapping it around my head like a turban.

I had been home from work for two hours and my telephone had not rung once. I couldn't believe that during the ten minutes I had just spent in the shower, my answering machine had recorded six messages.

As I rubbed the spot on my face where the strange wind had assaulted me in my bathroom, my heart started beating a tattoo against the inside of my chest, and my head started aching on both sides. A large framed picture of a Black, woolly-haired Jesus on the wall directly above my big-screen TV offered a little comfort, but not enough to calm my nerves.

The only painkiller in the house was some leftover margarita in the refrigerator. I made my way to the kitchen. In the dark I drank straight from the blender, licking the last few drops as it trickled down the side of my trembling hand.



I returned to the living room. Before I could rewind the tape on the answering machine, the telephone on the end table next to my living room sofa rang again. I lifted the receiver with caution before the answering machine clicked on, knocking a stack of old Essence magazines off the end table to the floor.

Before I could say anything, a female voice whispered, "Carmen, he's going to kill me.... Come get me." Then the phone went dead. I had cancelled caller ID and I was too afraid to hit *69, but I had a good idea who it was. As soon as I hung up, the phone rang again. "Carmen, did you get my messages? Where were you? I've been calling and calling!" Just as I had thought, it was Desiree Lucienne, my best friend and the one with the most baggage. That Desiree. She was a beautiful person inside and out. She was intelligent and her heart was in the right place, but she represented the dark side of the African-American dream. She was weak, self-centered, and foolish. Every time her bad choices got her in trouble, I was the broom she used to sweep up her mess.

"Desiree? What's the matter?" I asked in a labored voice. The noisy neighbors in the apartments on both sides of me were both blasting Whitney Houston. I heard a car backfire outside and then the scream of a siren. Peeping out of the window behind my sofa, I saw a dog running around in circles chasing his own tail under the yellow glow of a dim streetlight. A storm that had started right after I left work had intensified. The wind was howling and blowing the branches on the sumac tree outside my living room window against the side of my building so hard, I could barely hear Desiree, even though she was yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Carmen, Chester knows!" Desiree told me between raspy sobs. There was some static on the telephone line that made her voice seem even more irritating.

"Knows what?" The towel that I had wrapped around my wet hair had come undone. I took a deep breath, braced myself, and held the towel in place with both hands. I pressed the telephone between my shoulder and chin as I eased down on the sofa and crossed my legs.

"He knows I am planning to leave him. He knows everything. He even knows that you are the one who hid his gun!"

"Shit! How did he find out?"



Even with all of the windows in my living room cracked open, I started sweating profusely. I untied the belt to my bathrobe to keep it from sticking to my naked body. I let the bathrobe fall open, fanning myself with the tail.

"I don't know how he knows, but he knows." Desiree's voice changed from pleading to demanding. "You have to come get me. I need for you to bring my stuff to the house and get me out of here. Now."

"Where is Chester now?" I asked firmly, still fanning myself. A trickle of sweat slid from my face and dropped into my lap. I licked my lips, trying to savor the margarita I had splashed.

"He just left. He ran out of here when I locked myself in the bedroom. I don't want to be here when he gets back. When I tried to leave, he stretched out on the ground in front of my car. Oh-I've never seen him this mad."

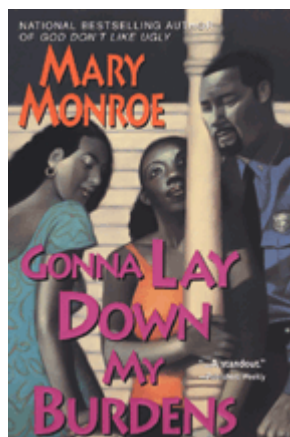
"Listen to me. Calm down," I advised, holding up my hand. "Chester is not crazy. I know him better than you do. He's mostly talk," I added, as I roughly wiped my face with the sleeve of my bathrobe.

"Carmen, he said he was going to kill me. I have to get out of Alabama tonight." Desiree's voice had risen to a howl.

"Tonight? Girl, I'm getting married tomorrow. You're supposed to be my matron of honor," I reminded her. "You guys been drinking?" I leaned over to pick up the magazines that I had knocked over and placed them on the coffee table next to a bowl of brown bananas and bruised apples.

"I haven't had a drop, but he's had a few. He's gone crazy, Carmen. You can even see it in his eyes!"

"Calm down," I insisted, holding the telephone away from my face for a brief moment. "Calm down? How can I calm down with a crazy man on the loose?" Desiree hollered. "Threatening to kill me!"



I sighed and held the phone closer to my ear. "Let me call you back in a few minutes. I just got out of the shower and I'm still wet. Let me dry my hair and put on some clothes. I promise, I'll be there in half an hour."

"Half an hour? Girl, I don't have that kind of time. I got to get up out of here now," Desiree wailed impatiently.

"Well, I can't fly and it'd take me at least ten minutes to get there anyway." I snatched the towel off my head and hurled it across the room. It landed on top of my TV, covering part of the large screen like a curtain. I had turned off the TV. A news break had interrupted a Cosby rerun to report a late-breaking story about some fishermen stumbling across the nude body of a dead young Black woman. I didn't want to have to deal with anybody's death on the eve of my wedding. "Listen, catch a cab and come on over here until Chester cools off."

"I don't want to catch a cab. I want you to come get me and take me to the airport in Meridian."

"Airport? In Meridian, Mississippi? What's wrong with you, girl?" I had a hard time getting my words out without choking on them. "You're not going to be around for my wedding?" "I won't be around for your wedding or anything else if I don't get out of this house and out of this state before Chester gets back."

This was not the first time Desiree had disappointed me. Though it didn't surprise me, it saddened me to know that of all things, my wedding was being upstaged by her latest dilemma. But she was my best friend, and though I had never burdened her with my problems, she had been a good friend for seventeen years. And even though it was with hesitation, I accepted part of the blame for her being so quick to turn to me when she needed help. I had allowed our friendship to come to this. I couldn't remember one single time when I hadn't come through for Desiree-and just about everybody else for that matter.

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