

CHAPTER ONE EXCERPT FOR THE UPPER ROOM

Chapter One

Dotted with thick forests of gray cypress, tulip, and magnolia, the territory known as Florida rests vaingloriously amid opalescent southern waters. Wild, long-stemmed flowers sway gently in the summer breeze, as damp moss that seems to fall from the sky clings to the trees. Along the Tamiami Trail across Florida's Everglades, alligators sun themselves on the banks, ready to scramble into the muddy water at the slightest provocation.

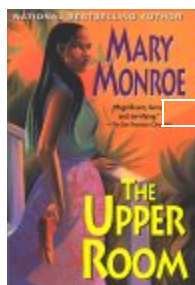
Maureen Montgomery was born in Silo, near the Everglades, on a humid evening in July during dog days, that period of inactivity between early July and early September when the sultry summer weather comes to the northern hemisphere. It was so warm that day that the lazy alligators, seduced by pleasure, lay lined up along the swamp banks in orderly fashion, waiting.

In the midst of the swamp stood a crudely built shanty. Inside, on a living room sofa, lay a woman who was almost as big around as she was tall. Ruby Montgomery, wearing a long, shapeless black flannel duster, rested on her side sipping her twelfth can of beer that day, a thirty-year-old black woman with a round face, small brown eyes, heavy black eyebrows, and generous lips. She had a nose that was too wide for her to be considered handsome.

Her house smelled of boiled pork and steamed cabbage. She had just lit the coal-oil lamps, and the dim light illuminated the walls of the living room with huge distorted shadows. The furniture was cheap and shabby, but everything was neatly arranged, for Orderliness and Godliness were part of southern tradition. An immaculate home, no matter how humble and plain, would surely please the Lord, it was preached in southern churches. Ruby tried to live up to the Lord's expectations, most of the time.

Outside, a chorus of barking coon dogs challenged the sweet calls of a remarkably fine lot of little birds: the mockingbird, tile blue jay, the woodpecker. In the sky above, a broad-winged turkey buzzard made a swooping, whistling sound. Not too far away, in a desolate swamp, a panther cried plaintively beneath the hot Florida sun. In the dense huckleberry patch beyond the palmetto jungles to the north, a small black bear ambled about in search of its mate. The day was coming to a dramatic close; now only a sleeve of orange sunlight separated the horizon from the heavens, and darkness was descending rapidly. A great hoot owl, the nocturnal lord of the South, perched anxiously atop a moss-draped tree outside Ruby's ramshackle house, a house almost hidden behind a knot of jasmine bushes. The hoot owl circled the house twice, then reluctantly returned to the moss-draped tree and waited.

The knocking at the front door was low at first. Ruby sat up on the sofa, annoyed by the noisy creatures outside. The knocking added to her irritation.



"Virgil!" she yelled.

There was no answer. Ruby waited a full minute before speaking again.

"I wonder where that simple boy of mine is," she said to herself. She swallowed the last of the beer, draining the can to make sure she didn't miss a drop of the precious beverage, and wiped her liver-colored lips with the tail of her duster. "Oomph ... wonder where my teeth could be," she murmured, looking around the room. She carefully lifted a mayonnaise jar lid from the floor. In it, a pair of dull, pink-gummed false teeth lay upside down. Ruby examined the teeth, looking at them for a long time before clumsily inserting both plates in her mouth. She clamped down and ground rhythmically, securing the teeth in place. "Now," she said, as if proud of her accomplishment.

"Virgil!" Ruby yelled again, looking around the room. She felt her chest, where she carried a cross and a switchblade at all times.

A frail, light-skinned boy of eleven, with gray eyes and wavy black hair, appeared in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. He was a reasonably attractive child with a small nose and thin lips. His square, angry face displayed a continent of dark brown freckles.

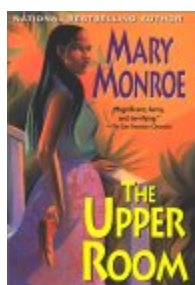
"What you want now, Mama Ruby? Seem like everytime I get me in a comfortable position, you start to meddle me. Virgil, get me a beer. Virgil, let the dog outside. Virgil, get me a beer. Virgil, change the channel on the TV set. Virgil, get me a beer--"

"Shet up, boy," Ruby said, slapping her thigh with her hand and stomping her foot.

"Yes, ma'am," Virgil muttered. His denim overalls were way too loose for his slender frame. He was shoeless, and his long, dusty feet were hard and reptilian, with curled toenails almost two inches long.

"Somebody at the door, sugar. Go answer it. I'm too tired to get up."

"Mama Ruby, I'm fired too. And I ain't your slave," Virgil whined.



"You been pesterin me all evenin."

"Answer the door, boy."

"But, Mama Ruby--"

"It liable to be that ole bill collector from the grocery store again. Or the candy-man what we owe for the peanut brittle. Could even be old man Parker comin to collect rent, which we ain't got."

"It could be just about anybody, Mama Ruby. You know how you is," Virgil said. Ruby remained silent for a moment, thinking about what her son had said as if it were a startling revelation. She looked at him and sighed, shrugging her huge shoulders and shaking her head slowly.

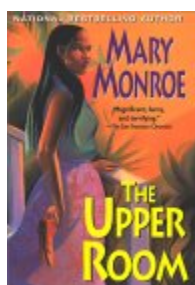
"Praise the Lord." Ruby set the empty beer can on the floor and rose up from the sofa with great difficulty. Virgil ran across the room to assist her. He grabbed her arm to steady her, almost falling himself, for even with years of practice, balancing this elephantine woman was no easy feat. The boy's arms ached and he gasped.

"Have mercy on my soul," he said, cursing his strain.

"Thank you, son." Ruby smoothed her duster along the sides of her thighs. "Now, go answer the door. Tell whoever it is I'm at the church or somethin. I'm sho nuff tired and I don't want to see no more human beins this evenin." Ruby waddled swiftly across the room on into the kitchen. Virgil giggled and tiptoed to the front window. He pulled back the drapes and peeked out.

"Mama Ruby, I don't see nobody!" he shouted over his shoulder.

The knocking continued, louder.



"Who it is, Virgil?" Ruby hollered from the kitchen, peeking from behind a large white cabinet that sat next to the sink. "Ax who it is, boy!"

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