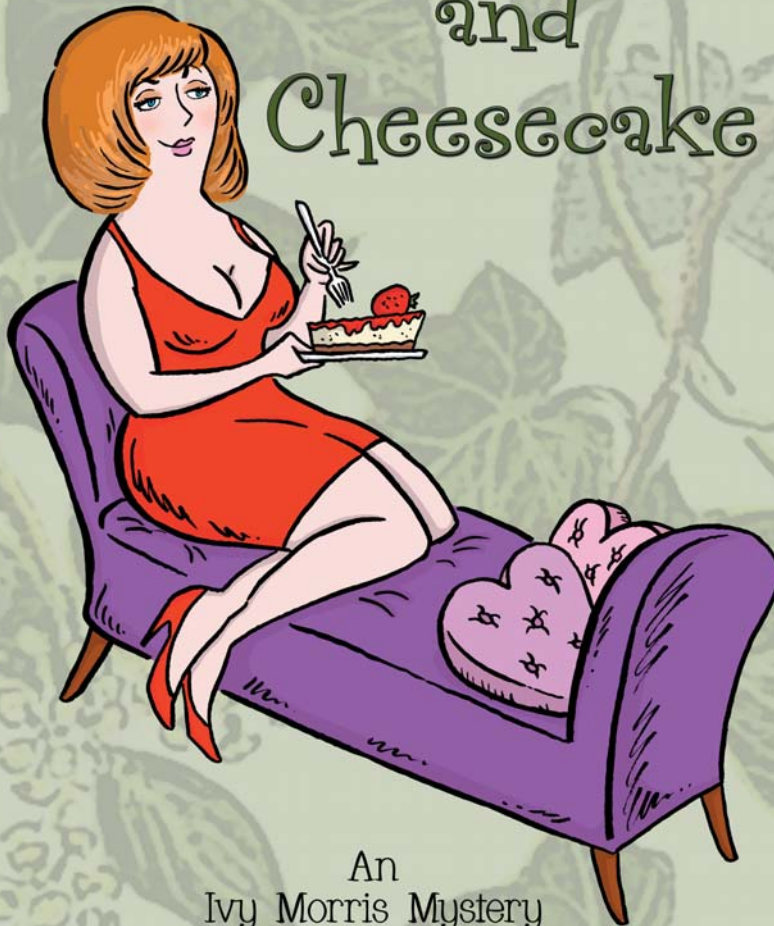


For Love  
and  
Cheesecake



An  
Ivy Morris Mystery  
Misty Simon

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Draumr Publishing, LLC  
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For Love and Cheesecake

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## Dedication

To Rida, who has been with me through this all. Thanks  
so much for taking a chance on me and Ivy.

And for Patricia Storms, who is the best damn cover artist  
in the world. YOU ROCK! Ivy wouldn't have been the  
same without you.



# Chapter One



Let me set the scene for you. It was Friday night over a year after I'd moved to the sleepy little town of Martha's Point, Virginia. Well, sleepy since about six months ago when I'd been instrumental in solving the last murder mystery to hit our backwater town.

Fortunately, those days were behind me, and now I was sitting at a linen covered table in my very favorite restaurant in the world, small town or not. Jerry Boucheron, chef extraordinaire, hadn't made an appearance yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time before the second man who claimed a part of my heart would come trundling out in all his six-feet-plus glory with some fantastic menu choices and hints on the special desserts he always made me.

Now I admit this was special treatment, especially for someone who still wasn't considered a local and probably wouldn't be for the next sixty years. But that was me, Ivy Morris, a special kind of girl. He loved my enthusiasm for his food, and I loved his food almost to the point of distraction.

Another distraction and love was sitting across from me,

lit by candlelight and the softly burning sconces on the wall. I really appreciated that Ben Fallon, my boyfriend, had arranged this whole outing. I was also highly impressed that he'd actually remembered our anniversary. And it wasn't even the anniversary of our first date, but of the first time I'd tripped out of my chair and landed with my hand on his goodies. At the time I hadn't even known his name (who was I kidding, I'd barely remembered my own name with the handful I'd gotten), but we'd been nearly inseparable since. For the last six months he'd been living at my house, taking up my space and breathing my air. I guessed that took us one step beyond dating and straight into living together. Not exactly what I had expected, but there weren't many complaints from my corner.

Ben still hadn't managed to consistently find the dirty laundry basket, but since that was my chief complaint, I figured it wasn't much.

He sat next to me in a sturdy, hand-carved chair, pulled up to a small table in the corner of the first floor of the converted old house. A string quartet played discreetly in the far corner, the strains of classical music floating through the air like a dream. The dim lighting highlighted Ben's gold-tipped brown hair, and softened the lines of his firm jaw. His grass green eyes seems to glow out of his tan face as he drank me in with the gaze that always gave me tingles straight from the tips of my highlighted hair to my red painted toenails. I couldn't see my toenails since I was wearing closed toed shoes in deference to the early cold snap that had come through our small town yesterday, but Ben would see them later when he did all the naughty things he'd threatened earlier—or promised, depending on how you looked at it.

It was October, but to this native California girl, it felt like the dead of winter. I hadn't yet gotten used to the colder weather on this side of the country, but at least I wasn't still bundling up like I'd been abandoned in the Yukon.

Ben took my hand in his and kissed my palm. It nearly did me in the same way his whispers did. I shivered as he placed my still burning palm on his rock-solid thigh.

"No hanky-panky," I said, trying to keep a straight face. We always had hanky-panky and rarely thought about where we

were—well, he never thought about it. I tried to, but often got sidetracked. But oh, how nice it was to still be able to mess around like this was all completely new.

To be honest, this was the longest relationship I'd ever had and sometimes I still worried it would all fall out from under me, or be one long, complicated dream I could never hold onto.

But Ben's leg was solid under my hand and his gaze burned into mine. Yeah, this was real. And it was here to stay.

"So," I said, taking my napkin with my free hand and spreading it on my lap. "To what do I owe this particular pleasure?"

Ben's eyes crinkled with his wide smile. "I wanted to show you how much I love you."

"Ha! And you're hoping that if you load me up with enough cheesecake, I'll be easy and let you into my pants tonight."

He laughed, a sound that never failed to run up and down my spine. "Well, there is that. Though I think maybe I have a better chance now since we're sleeping together all the time." He leaned back in his chair and pushed his feet forward, stretching out his legs and moving my hand higher up his thigh in the process.

I moved it back and watched his mouth form a pout. Aw, poor baby. I gave him a little jewel squeeze, enjoying the way his eyes popped wide open before I moved my hand back into my own lap.

"I think I might have missed that," he said, a cheeky smile on his lips. Lips I wanted to lick almost more than the Fettuccine Alfredo I saw coming across the room on the waitress' tray. "Care to do it, again?" he asked.

"You didn't miss anything." I peeked at his lap and saw the evidence of that large and clearly outlined by the placket of his dress pants. He wouldn't be standing up anytime soon. "Now, behave yourself. Our food is coming."

"I know what else I'd like to see coming," he said under his breath, but I heard him and gave him another intimate pat. That ought to keep him going for a little while.

Bernice, our server, gently placed Ben's food in front of him, never taking her eyes from his face. Then she pretty much threw my plate down in front of me.

But being a quick study, I had gotten used to the attention

Ben received. I caught the plate before it fell onto the floor, then rearranged it in front of me to my specifications. The pasta looked marvelous and as long as Bernice didn't accidentally on purpose fall into Ben's lap, I was all for enjoying my meal piping hot while Ben was otherwise preoccupied.

After about three fruitless minutes of Bernice trying to get at Ben, while I hummed under my breath at the deliciousness of my food, Ben finally got rid of the woman. "Thanks so much for all your help, Ivy. You could have at least attempted to play the dutiful girlfriend and tried to scratch her eyes out." He harrumphed and picked up his fork.

I took my time swallowing and wallowing in the creamy, cheesy goodness of my food. "Not my job."

"Not your job? I thought it was your job to keep all other women away from me." He was joking, I knew it. After the way women chased after him several months ago, I would never doubt his faithfulness again. And if he thought I was going to fight his battles, he was sadly mistaken. Again, not my job. He was a big boy and could handle himself just fine.

And I told him so.

"That's not very Ivy of you."

I shrugged. "Eh, I'm turning over a new leaf. Besides, I do your dirty laundry, you're not going anywhere else."

At that he laughed and we resumed eating, having meaningless conversation which meant a lot to me. We'd settled into a nice pattern of living together, even if my dad continued to make noises about us getting married. Dad was annoying, to say the least, but I had to admit sitting across from Ben right now, I wouldn't necessarily mind a big sparkly diamond on my finger. Not that I'd tell Ben. Whenever he was ready was fine with me.

Chef Jerry came out at that moment, knocking me out of my shimmering dreams. His eyes gleamed as he headed my way, but before he could cross the floor, another man breezed into the dining room. I would have sworn in a court of law that Jerry's eyes went red and steam shot out of his ears. He trucked across the room and dragged the man into a secluded corner.

Well, actually it was only kind of secluded since it was where Ben and I were sitting. I certainly wasn't complaining. It meant

I could unobtrusively (good word! I have loved big words since I was little and the affair has never stopped.) eavesdrop on what exactly was bad enough that Jerry looked ready to blow.

“And where the in nine living hells have you been?” Jerry hissed. I crept back in my chair at his vehement (another good one, I was on a roll. My dad, who I often traded these words with, would be so proud) tone. I was surprised no venom was frothing out of his mouth. Whoo-wee, I would not have wanted to be the other guy for anything in the world. I heard a snicker at another table and chose to ignore it.

“I’m here, don’t get your britches in a wad.”

Wow! I would never have talked to someone like that, especially someone who was about to blow a gasket.

And that’s exactly what Jerry did, though I did have to admire the way he kept his voice down to a low growl. I doubted anyone else in the restaurant heard him, yet I was right there, front and center. Ben was listening just as avidly as we kept our eyes locked on each other. Let me tell you, that was one of the most difficult things I’d ever done.

“My britches, as you call them, are far from being in a wad, you unmitigated jackass. But your employment here is going to be in serious jeopardy if you cannot start following the rules and showing up on time. Three hours late to your shift is unacceptable, no matter who you think you are. And I will not tell you again that you need to use the rear entrance like all the other wait staff.”

“But I’m not everyone else.”

I flicked a glance over at the brazen guy. I couldn’t help it. He had ginger-colored hair and lightly tanned skin. At about six foot, he was no match for Jerry in any way, shape or form. Jerry was at least six and a half feet tall and, while I might think of him as a teddy bear with his rotundness, he looked more like a grizzly now. What on earth was this guy thinking?

“You can’t do anything to me without hurting yourself and you know it,” he continued. “Your mom would skin you alive if you got rid of her favorite godchild.” He smirked. “I’ll just head on back to the kitchen to see who needs my help.”

My eyes drifted over to them again and I watched as Jerry clenched his fists into balls while the guy breezed on through the

dining room as if nothing had happened. Talk about having some serious brass ones. Even if their families were close. Again, I thought, *Wow!*

I let my gaze rest back on Jerry for a second. A second in which he caught me looking before I could hide my interest in the conversation. The raw pain on his face made my heart clench. I didn't think there was anything I could do to help, but the urge to ask was almost overwhelming.

Ben must have read my mind because he squeezed my hand and gave a small, quick shake of his head. He mouthed the word "no" in case I hadn't understood his other signals.

I wasn't dumb, but I didn't want to say anything to bring more attention our way. Jerry was already straightening his white coat over his checkered pants and fixing a smile firmly on his face. This was going to be awkward. Yay.

"Ivy, my beautiful pear, how is your meal? Do you love the cheesy fantasticness of the sauce? Are you sure I can't interest you in my succulent shrimp? They would make a marvelous addition." He rested his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little squeeze.

I had the strangest reaction, even for me. I knocked back my chair and ran for the bathroom.

"Ivy, are you still in here?"

I heard Ben walk into the women's room at the restaurant and wanted to throw up again. Of course, I had nothing left in my stomach, but it was a thought, anyway.

"Babe, do you need any help?"

I made myself unclamp my hand from my mouth and answer him. If he came in here now, I was not going to be a happy camper. Well, certainly no happier than I already was. I absolutely hated to throw up. "I'm fine. Go back out before you get into trouble for being a perv. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Why don't you let me in and I'll rub your back, or hold your hair?"

Totally gross! Absolutely not! But what I really said was, "Go on out, I'll be there in a second. Thanks for the offer."

Yeah, still gross, but what else could I say? I didn't want him

to think I was ungrateful. But honestly, I couldn't even think about having anyone touch me right now. Although I was suddenly feeling much better.

After washing my hands and rinsing out my mouth, I went back to our table. Ben was seated again with Jerry still standing behind my chair.

Just the person I did not want to see. Dangit!

"My blossom, are you ill? Did my food make you sick? Are you okay?"

"No, no, and yes, Jerry. Don't worry about me." I patted his hand, then sat to cross my legs under the table. Ben's palm settled on my thigh, making me feel better instantly. "I think I have a touch of the flu or something. Of course dinner was fabulous." I looked up into his eyes, giving him my best, most sincere smile. I must have hit my mark because he put his hand to his heart.

"Thank goodness," he said. "We're having a few issues in the kitchen this evening and I wanted to make sure they weren't leeching over into the food."

"Nope." But I still did feel a little squicky in my stomach. Though I certainly wasn't going to tell him that at this point.

He walked away, allowing me to breathe a sigh of relief. Now I could get back to my dinner with the lovely Ben. His hand kept straying to the breast pocket of his suit jacket. Yes, he was in a suit, and to be honest, he looked good enough to eat.

But why did his hand keep straying? Did he have indigestion? Heart problems? A ring in there, perhaps? And why on earth did I keep thinking about getting engaged between bouts of feeling sick to my stomach? If Ben got down on one knee I'd probably barf on him by accident. Oy!

But part of my poor little brain was almost disappointed when the evening ended with nothing of the sort. Not the puking part, because not doing that was definitely good, but the proposal. Which was weird since I had been sure it wasn't what I wanted yet. I was comfortable, or at least getting used to the arrangement we currently had. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that my best friend, Bella Landry, and her hunky boyfriend, Jared Henderson, had run off to Las Vegas last month and gotten hitched.

Yes, I swear you read that right. Bella got married again. She'd managed to get Jared to agree to an elopement even though this was his first marriage. I don't know how, but it probably involved his handcuffs and some quality time with Bella in leather.

Regardless, I did not want to think about it.

So, that's why it was so weird to have disappointment sitting in my stomach as Ben unlocked the front door to my, I mean, our house.

I put my purse down on the front hall table and kicked off my shoes into the closet right inside the door. I didn't think my poor feet could handle another minute in the spiky heels. Popping onto the couch, I purred when Ben made a beeline for the opposite end, taking my left foot into his hand and massaging with those lovely, strong hands.

"Oh, man, don't stop!" I sounded almost orgasmic. My already loose feeling legs took on the consistency of limp spaghetti when Ben growled low in his throat. Thank goodness I was already sitting down and not feeling so pukey anymore.

His eyes gleamed with a wicked light while his hands roamed farther up my calves, trailing to my thighs.

Oh, mama! Come to me.