



Poison Ivy



Misty
Simon

an Ivy Morris Mystery

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Misty Simon

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all my family and friends who never laughed when I said I wanted to be a writer. Thanks for your faith in me and your encouragement.

I also wanted to send a major thank you to Danita for reading and helping and reading some more.

Also to all my girls at MTW - BDB, my ladies.

And lastly, to the wonderful writers at CLWOW, KOD and BBWRomance, you are all inspiration for me every day.

Let the adventure begin.

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Prologue



I think sometimes a defining moment in life can hit you out of left field. For example, I had no idea my life would change forever when I opened the mailbox on a bright, sunny September day.

I expected the usual junk mail, and maybe a few bills to add to my growing collection. I found all of that along with a circular for the latest fashions at Sears and a letter from a law office in a place called Kilmarnock, Virginia.

My great aunt lived in Virginia, but I knew she didn't work for an attorney. Come to think of it, I hadn't heard from her in a while.

The thin letter felt heavy in my hand. I barely kept myself from ripping it open as I walked up the driveway. Before I hit the door, I heard my father's booming voice. I could swear it rattled the fronds on the palm tree standing in the dinner plate-sized front yard.

"Anything good in the mail, Ivy?" my dad yelled from the living room of our old house as I entered the small foyer. "I'm waiting for the Sears catalog."

I was so entranced by the letter and the secrets it might hold, I didn't answer him right away, which earned me yet another

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eardrum shaking yell. “Yes, yes,” I said impatiently, and walked toward my father’s bellow. I handed him the Sears catalog. At least it would keep him entertained for some time and out of my hair while I read what an attorney from Virginia could want with a girl who’d lived in California all her twenty-four years.

Leaving my father to drool over tools and the latest in flannel, I rushed up the stairs and into my room. My mom had decorated it all in pink shortly before she died and I hadn’t managed to repaint it yet. At ten, the room was beautiful, but fourteen years later it needed an overhaul. I would have loved to paint it a nice taupe, but every time I made some noise about changing the color my dad would get this look of agony on his face and I’d drop the subject. It was a pattern he realized worked well on me, and he wasn’t one to change things when they worked, so we were at an impasse. Still, every time I entered the entirely pink domain, I got depressed and wanted out of the room, out of his house. I could keep on dreaming because as the youngest of four girls and the only one not married, I was stuck here helping him, trying to be a good daughter when all I really wanted was to break away. Plus housing costs were so high, there was no way I could afford to live on my own.

From the fuchsia desk on the far wall I picked up a letter opener and made a slit in the envelope. Questions tumbled over one another in my head. What could this be? Could it have something to do with my Great Aunt Gertie, whom I hadn’t heard from in ages? Why the personal attention? Was it good news or bad news?

Why was I getting worked up over a stupid envelope?

Finally, I wrestled the cheap plastic opener through the heavy paper. For once I didn’t snag the letter and cut it in my haste to open the envelope.

Yanking the single tri-folded sheet out, two words jumped out at me like that hot-looking guy my friends hired to burst from my oversized birthday cake last month: your inheritance.

Chapter One



“I really appreciate you guys helping with this,” I said to the “Bouquet.” My three sisters are Daisy, Rose and Magnolia, so it’s a family joke. My guess was our parents ran out of flowers when they reached me. I’ve often felt blessed I didn’t end up as Petunia and Ivy wasn’t much better, but I was stuck with it.

They were helping me unpack the few things I’d brought with me to Martha’s Point, Virginia, from the pink room of horror. Thankfully, I didn’t need much because my newly inherited house came furnished. It turned out the one-page letter was notification of my Great Aunt Gertie’s passing and my status as her sole heir. It was sad, but she’d been ninety-three and had lived a full life.

“Dad decided not to come because he’s sure I’ll be back in two weeks, tops.” I was bound and determined to prove him wrong.

“I can’t believe you’re going to run a costume shop, Ivy. You don’t know anything about retail,” Rose, the voice of reason, said. “You’re an administrative assistant not a proprietress.” A small store, The Masked Shoppe, was part of the inheritance, too.

“Good word, Rose,” I said. Using big words was a game we’d played for years. “And I will be a proprietress starting Monday. Mr. Winnet, the lawyer, said the store can open then and I borrowed every book from the library on running a business. I’ll beef up

on my knowledge over the weekend and be ready for Monday. I shop all the time, surely I can brazen my way through being on the other side of the counter. This will work. I can feel it.”

A snort sounded from behind my right shoulder where Maggie was folding towels. “This strikes me as something that takes college classes and experience,” Maggie, the teacher, said. “I don’t believe you can simply jump in and wing it.” Magnolia was the oldest and often the damper on any party.

I made a nasty face at Maggie. “There was a Mrs. Drake at the will reading and she said she’d help me in any way she could. I got the impression she and Great Aunt Gertie were tight before Gertie died. Anyway, Mrs. Drake said she used to work in the shop all the time during their busy seasons.”

“Well, that’s something, at least,” Daisy said. “Maybe you won’t get into that much trouble with someone helping you. I thank God it’s you instead of me.” Daisy, the eternal optimist.

A chorus of agreement filled the small bedroom. I knew none of them wanted the store. They were all living their fantasy lives with wonderful husbands and two kids each. In fact, two of them, Daisy and Maggie, had actual white picket fences surrounding their homes.

“I’ll be fine, guys. And I want to thank you again for all your help, I feel better knowing you three are firmly in my corner.” Okay, so that was a facetious—another good word—statement. But I was out of my father’s house and on my own for the first time ever. I’d be damned if I didn’t take this opportunity and milk it for everything I could. I wouldn’t care if I were selling plastic doll arms and legs as long as I lived on my own. It was a bonus that I would get to sell something as interesting as costumes, from the ordinary to the exotic. Oh, plus I lived three thousand miles away from the family home.

Unpacking continued and soon the dinner hour rolled around. We ordered pizza from the only delivery place within twenty miles and settled down with wine in jelly jar glasses. The heady aroma of pepperoni scented the air. It was time to celebrate my first Friday night in my house.

“So what’s your plan for Monday?” Daisy asked with cheese dripping from the corner of her mouth.

“I thought I’d go in and begin inventory with Mrs. Drake. She said I could familiarize myself with the stock and she’d help with ordering and ringing up sales. She laughed a lot when talking about what’s for sale, which made me a little uneasy. Do you think it’s anything risqué or trashy?”

The Bouquet laughed and started naming a variety of costumes they’d like to see me try to sell. The words dominatrix and streetwalker figured prominently in the conversation.

“Promise me you won’t wear something beige for your first day,” Rose said, and had my back going up.

With my mousy brown hair, fair complexion and a little bit of extra weight, I thought I looked best in browns. Plus, it was a way to not draw attention to myself at my last job. Everyone there was about the size of a #2 pencil and then there was me, the big, fat permanent marker.

“I’ll try,” I mumbled.

“What?” asked Rose.

Louder, I said, “I’ll try. I know I have some colorful things hanging in the armoire Great Aunt Gertie left. I’ll look over the weekend and promise not to wear anything remotely brown. Not even beige. All right?”

“Much better. You need a splash of color.” This from Maggie, who had beautiful midnight black hair and looked stunning in anything she put on. She could wear the jewel tones, pastels, black or stark white. I’m comfortable in brown. But I guess I could step out of my monochromatic wardrobe for one day and try something new. Then again, maybe not. Besides, they wouldn’t be here to see what I wore anyway. They’d all leave Martha’s Point tomorrow to go back to their perfect lives.

I told them as much, and then wanted to pull the words back because it meant a trip to the closet. They pronounced the lone black skirt in my closet perfect when matched with a purple silk blouse—a Christmas gift from my boss last year. Under penalty of death and the horror of extended stays, they told me to wear that outfit. Being the confrontation wimp that I am, I agreed. The color brown wasn’t worth dying over. And as much as I loved my sisters, I was never again so happy as the day they all left my dad’s house. I finally got first crack at the bathroom each morning. My

new house had two bathrooms but they still managed to push me to the back of the line during their stay here.

When we'd finally stuffed ourselves silly and drunk enough wine to float a small boat, everyone bunked down in my two available bedrooms to sleep off the effects of our carb overdose.

That Sunday, I spent a lazy morning studying my books and looking at the outfit my sisters set out for me. The Bouquet had left on a plane out of DC the day before without incident and they'd all called to confirm they arrived home safely. Each took a turn hounding me about not wearing brown tomorrow.

I tried the skirt on three different times throughout the day and each time my legs still looked like tree stumps coming out from under the knee length hem. No way was I going to wear something that made me feel like a lumberjack on my first day in my new shop.

I'd wear something brown. But as a concession to the promise I made my three sisters, I'd check out the other businesses in the area for a decent salon. If I happened to find one, I'd see about doing something with my mop of lifeless, dull brown hair.

The air was fresh and turning crisp with the onset of October. Red, gold and orange leaves hung suspended from the trees standing back from the sidewalk. I hoped the shop would be bustling tomorrow with Harvest and Halloween parties right around the corner. I couldn't help but compare my new life with my old.

In California it would be another ninety-degree day and few, if any, leaves actually fell from the trees unless the tree was dead. And palm trees never changed color. In the neighborhood where my dad lived—it was no longer my home because I had one to call my own, thank you Great Aunt Gertie—city workers put a ton of the tall, broad-leafed giants along the street when the neighborhood was new. Almost every house had one. But here, they had so many different varieties of trees it was breathtaking.

As I passed a woman raking fallen leaves in her front yard, I added a sturdy rake to my list of things I needed to purchase. It went on the mental list under sweaters and extra jeans. My

blood wasn't very thick yet, and it was already cold, which as I understood, lasted until sometime in March.

The woman dressed in a bright red sweater lifted her hand to wave as I walked by. The week I'd been a resident of Martha's Point had taught me that almost everyone here was friendly, unless you were an outsider. I couldn't forget the dead fish I'd found on the hood of my car my first night here. Disgusting, but I'd heard Californians were not wanted in this part of the country. Or any part of the country, for that matter. I had a friend who moved to Washington State who changed her license plates in Oregon before the last leg of her trip to avoid the label "damned Californian."

I hoped people would forget where I hailed from as I continued to live here and tried to slip in with the locals. Running The Masked Shoppe ought to help. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was toilet-papering my house or trying to poison me in the local restaurant.

I waved back to the woman and continued down the street. I hadn't spent much time out in the town yet because I'd been busy unpacking. But if I wanted business to come into my shop I knew I had to give business to other shops. In a town this small that wasn't a guarantee, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

The street was only two blocks long and you'd probably miss it if you sneezed while driving 35 miles per hour through town. Halfway through the second block I came to a shop named Bella's Best. The name didn't give me a hint as to the nature of the business but I couldn't miss the large picture with a silhouette of scissors cutting a big head of hair. I'd already walked by all the other shops and this appeared to be the only one to offer women's hairstyling. There was a barber with one of those rotating candy-striped poles out front, but I wasn't trusting my hair, mousy or not, to someone who probably still used the strop to sharpen his blades.

I won't say this shop with its big hair advertising looked any more promising, but I walked in anyway. It couldn't hurt. And since it was the only beauty shop, I had no other choice. If I chickened out when I saw the hairdresser (visions of big teased hair the color of autumn maple leaves ran through my mind), I could always get a trim and still have given a local some of my business.

"I'll be right there, hon," I heard a voice yell from the back of the shop as I pushed open the glass and chrome door. The vision

crowding my head suddenly had a huge beehive hair do and a bright red mouth furiously working a piece of gum. Someone who wore tight, bright, nubby sweaters and vinyl pants like Dolly Parton in *Steel Magnolias*.

Definitely just the trim.

The saloon style doors swung open from the back and my vision collapsed and died a grateful death. The voice may have been brassy, but the woman who came through the white doors was as far from the big hair, tight sweater group as I could imagine. Flair legged jeans hugged slender thighs and narrow feet were encased in those four-inch heels I'd never been able to even think about wearing. Not unless I wanted to walk around with a neck brace for a dozen weeks. She wore a deep blue cowl necked sweater over the pre-faded jeans and had a beautiful head of mahogany hair with subtle highlights. This woman I would trust with my hair. I felt it in my bones like when you find a deli or a new flavor of ice cream you can't live without.

"Hi, Hon," she said in a drawl that wasn't nearly as thick as I had originally thought. "What can I do for you?"

Suddenly I was a little nervous. Was I ready to let go of the long hair I'd always hidden behind? Would this beautiful woman understand what to do with me—an overweight woman that was seriously hair impaired?

Maybe she sensed my hesitation because she came over and stood right in front of me. "I'm Bella," she said and tipped her scissors toward a plaque above the one station in the small shop. "And you're the new girl going to run Gertie's shop." It wasn't a question, more like a declaration, so I merely nodded.

"Well then, city girl, we'd better fix you up before your first day tomorrow. You want to impress those old gals who come in and shop for the belly dancer costumes don't you?"

I pulled my jaw off the floor. "Belly dancing? Seriously?"

She laughed, a musical tinkle, and led me to a chair. "Sure, Hon. Didn't anyone tell you the costume shop also doubles as a lingerie store since we don't have anything else around here? We're not catalog shoppers, either. People don't want *those* kind of packages going past nose old Thelma Boden down at the post office."

“Uh, no. No one mentioned the lingerie part. What kinds of things do people buy over there?” My new friend, Bella, proceeded to tell me exactly what I could expect to supply and how lucky I was to catch her in the shop today since it was usually closed on Sundays. During the entire haircut I kept thinking the Bouquet would laugh their collective asses off if they found out. Dominatrix was mild.

The next day, bright sunlight stabbed through the backs of my eyelids and it took me a moment to orient myself. I couldn't be in the pink room because I'd always purposely kept it dark for morning so as not to be blinded by the brilliance of the sun bouncing off the lacquered walls. And I didn't have a boyfriend, so no way was this some dreamy, post-coital wake-up moment.

After a second, the previous week came back in a flash and I jumped out of bed to greet my first morning as a proprietress. Stumbling, because I was on fast forward, I ran into the bathroom and brushed out my bed head, hoping it would glisten like the Herbal Essences commercials. I used a leave-in conditioner, trying to get it all to lie down the way Bella had shown me on Saturday. The chunky highlights fell nicely around my face and actually made me look thinner. Bonus.

I skipped to the makeup portion of the morning ritual and used the liner pencil without sticking myself in the eye, which was my custom. I also managed to get blush evenly distributed on my cheeks.

Bella had promised to be at the store this morning to give me a support system on my first day. We'd really hit it off and found we had several things in common. She was an avid reader and we both loved John Cusack movies so we were well on our way down friendship lane.

My next sprint was to the huge wardrobe my dearly beloved Great Aunt Gertie had left behind, where I ran a hand over the many outfits hanging in a straight, precise row. Glancing at the black skirt and purple top still lying on the divan in the corner, I decided the highlights were daring enough for now and tugged a tan pantsuit from a hanger. As a concession to the Bouquet, I also

pulled a thin purple leather belt from the closet to circle around my waist under the suit jacket.

I dressed in a hurry, threw on a pair of matching flats and jogged through the entryway. In a heartbeat, I was out the beveled door to my future, which, fortunately, was a short walk down to the left.

Bless Mr. Winnet's heart, the key to *my* store waited in the mailbox as promised. For a key that had seen twenty years of use, it was shinier than I'd expected. But my enthusiasm for actually having it in my hot little hand overrode any concern lurking in my brain.

I took a moment to enjoy the other small, privately owned shops and round, wooden tubs of flowers on the old sidewalk as I made my way along Main Street. Each store had a very individual look to it. Besides Bella's shop, there was a grocer and a dentist, a vintage clothing store, a used bookstore, and one video store. I might have to get that NetFlix thing because Bella said the video store had only recently started carrying a limited selection of DVDs and I lived for movies on DVD.

Some stores were renovated old houses and some were remodeled old buildings. The overall feeling was homey and appealing. I always knew I wasn't a big city girl and this confirmed it.

A wooden sign painted bright white and deep green announced The Masked Shoppe. I'll admit the name wasn't exactly original. In fact, I'd been giving some thought to changing it to something different, something more, something snappier. But for now, regardless of the lifeless name, it was mine. Really, that was all that mattered. Although, on second thought, the name did have a certain flare considering I now knew the shop had a dual purpose. Maybe I would keep it.

I felt like a bottle of champagne should be smashed or some other celebratory thing done to commemorate my first time in the store. It was locked up during the will probate and the lawyer had asked me not to come into the shop until today. To say it nearly killed me was an understatement. I would have hunted him down like a rabid squirrel if the key hadn't been in the mailbox this morning.

The key slid into the lock with a satisfactory click and turned without hesitation. With a soft drum roll under my breath, I opened the door, ceremoniously taking a bold first step into my new life. And found myself smack in the middle of utter chaos.

