

**Sweet Cream Ladies, LTD
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Chapter 1

“Holy Duplicity! It’s Madam Minerva.”

“What? Where? Why? Wait. Who’s Madam Minerva?”

“Didn’t I tell you about her?”

“No way. I would have remembered that name. Madam Minerva. Let me guess. A Greek hooker who rose up the ladder and now runs the cathouse? No. No. Hang on. Let me take another stab at this —fortune teller in a Greek tragedy circus?”

I growled, “Close. Remember me telling you that Todd and I had gone in for counseling about two months before the split?”

Babs nodded. “Yeah—but you didn’t say with whom.”

“Sorry. I was trying to flush the entire experience into the nearest sewer where it belonged.”

Babs stopped mid-mug-raise. “Damn, Bootise, you never told me it was that bad. I mean I knew the marriage was but what’s this about the counseling? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was too humiliated.”

“Why?”

“Because Madam Minerva, whose real name is Minerva Krempowsky and whom I am now calling Madam Medusa since her fried perm is a perfect replica of a Medusa head and she’s just as evil—hang on—where was I going with this? Oh yeah. She puts the one name, Minerva, on her business card and she’s a world-class lying slime-bucket. Had I seen the little sucker—the business card— before Todd roped me into going, I’d’ve hid in a subway tunnel for a month with the rats who were kinder and less lethal.”

Babs winced. “Ouch.”

“Yeah. As it turned out, not only was Madam Minerva not a licensed counselor, she was seeing Karalynn at the same time she was having her little marital bliss sessions with Todd and me.”

“Seriously? You’re talkin’ Karalynn as in. . .?”

“The girl Todd was banging while married to me.”

Babs turned around to stare at the woman who was wearing enough scarves to stock a Turkish bazaar and more eye make-up than a top model posing as that Greek hooker.

“Totally unethical. Not to mention, Bootsie, this woman is beyond ugly.”

“And greedy. But I didn’t know about that until last week when I was trying out passwords on Todd’s old computer. The s.o.b generously donated his to me because he had to have a new one.”

“Whadja find?”

“Madam Minerva has a web site. Password-protected. Idiots—no that’s rude—let’s say desperate people may come to the web site and ask questions of Madam Minerva, which she will answer for a steep price. The kicker? She uses tarot cards. On line. It’s called Spankthepalm.com or something.”

Babs nearly spit out her coffee. “You’re not serious!”

“I am. Well, not about the name of the place—although it really is something with palm in it— but she does charge for readings. It’s like those old Psychic Hot-line scams from the Eighties.” I smiled grimly. “She soaked Todd for a bundle. Which really pisses me off since he left me with less than nothing and those credit cards he used to charge happened to be shared with me. Thank God I finally got my name off them.”

“What’d he ask her? On the palm spanking site, that is.”

“Ready for this? Stuff like, ‘which woman should I choose?’ After nearly thirteen years of marriage I thought that question had kind of been settled.”

Babs raised an eyebrow. “Apparently, not so for our Toddy. Anything else juicy?”

“Howzabout, ‘is she pregnant?’ I would have to assume he didn’t mean me since I hit menopause three years ago. Not to mention that we hadn’t had sex in about two years.” I looked up at the ceiling and mused, “Does it grow back, do you think?”

“Six years.”

“Six?”

“Yep. According to all reliable sources, no sex for six years means you get to reclaim virgin status.” Babs declared solemnly.

“Well, hell, in that case, I get extra points. I should have reclaimed much further back.”

“Are you telling me Toddy wasn’t the studley stud he wants the world to think he is?”

“Let’s just say that never once in the marriage did he— uh. . . .” I blushed, “Uh—nicest way I can put it is he didn’t return any favors.”

“Shit.”

“Yep. And even with lousy sex, I was, and would have remained, faithful. But it’s nice to know I’m a virgin again. Makes me feel at least thirty years younger.”

We grinned at each other, then I stated, “She needs to die.”

“Karalynn? Shoot, Bootise. If Todd’s that selfish a lover, Karalynn may not stick with him either.”

I shook my head. “Not talkin’ Karalynn. Yet. As far as death is concerned. I’m referring to the sweetly deceptive Minerva. I mean, I kind of understand Karalynn. She became enchanted by the famous Todd Kittredge charm so it’s hard blaming her since she’s like twelve and hell, I didn’t know better at forty when I met the fink and got sucked into his web as well. But Minerva knew Karalynn had oodles of money, knew Todd was interested and slithered her way into our lives so Todd would get a trophy wife and I’d get zip.”

Babs nodded. “Yep. A gruesome death. Perhaps by something occulty. Is that a word?”

“No, but the meaning is clear, so I say keep it. The woman needs to die.”

We lapsed into silence for a moment or two to eat while the food was still hot. I finished my Irish oatmeal then stated, “Oh. Ready for the other crappy news of the day?”

Babs winced. “Go on.”

“I didn’t get it.”

“Oh doo-doo. What did Chuck say?”

I sighed. Audibly. “He was very tactful for an agent. ‘They gave it to Charmaine Freedman because they’ve used her before.’ Chuck did not say, ‘Bootsie, you’re at an awkward age and there isn’t a hope in hell you can even find a job hawking alert bracelets that call first responders within seconds of bumping your knee on the kitchen counter and falling on the floor unable to move.’”

“ ‘xcuse me? Did I hear that correctly? Awkward age? Pardon my curiosity, but have I missed something? Like your entire adult life?”

“Think about it. I’m fifty-five with a face that Chuck tells me looks thirty-five, not an ounce of white in the strawberry-blond locks and thirty-two damned pounds overweight. I can’t play grannies because I look too young but can’t play wives in ‘rev up your sex life commercials’ because those thirty-two pounds knock me out of contention for being seductive. Fat wives aren’t considered enticing to men with erectile dysfunction.”

I mindlessly slathered a good tablespoons-worth of butter on my scone, took a bite, then immediately, but delicately, spat it out into my napkin. “I hate him. I really, truly absolutely despise him.”

Babs nodded. She knew I wasn’t referring to Chuck Willingham, agent and friend. “Me, too.”

“I dream about ways for him to die. Sprinkling a little ground glass into his 1999 Chateau le Pin Pomerol—or perhaps slashing the brake line on his new classic Corvette.”

An expression of sheer horror crossed Babs’ face. “My God! You can’t do that?”

“Why? Because I’d end up in the women’s section of Sing-Sing?” I mused, “Do they have a women’s section of Sing-Sing?”

Babs shook her head, then produced a most unladylike snort. “No. No. Forget Sing-Sing. That might be a plus. A free roof over your head and three squares that are so bad you’d lose the thirty-two pounds in perhaps fifteen days. I may join you in homicidal mania. I have forty to dump and since I’m shorter I should really lose fifty. We’ll write a book, call it the ‘Sing-Sing Diet,’ subtitled ‘Kill Your Mate and Drop the Weight’ and make a fortune. No. It’s the ‘how’ I object to. You can’t destroy a perfectly fine automobile just for the sake of sending Todd to the next world in a fiery—albeit well-deserved—crash. And the wine angle is also unacceptable. Ruining a thousand dollar Bordeaux is just—wrong.”

“True.”

We clinked mugs together. I carefully wiped the overspill off my hand and lowered my volume. “If I had the money I’d hire a hit man. Clean. Thorough. Nothing traced back to me.”

“I like it.”

We chewed muffins and drank our French Vanilla coffee and contemplated various scenarios to dispatch my ex-husband Todd to meet his maker sooner than Todd might be anticipating. We considered basics like stabbing, or suffocating. Classics, like a simple shooting or a little arsenic in something other than good wine.

Babs grabbed a raisin-filled scone and tore off off the tip before stating, “We should come up with a plan that would also remove Clay from existence. I know, I know—I’ve been divorced for a ridiculous twenty-four years and should be over it by now but really—the man put the sonova in sonovabitch and he needs to be gone from the gene pool before he has another chance to populate it with someone who resembles him and his latest bimbo, Tammy, is sending signs to the universe that she’d like to be the one to do the populating. Thank heaven Bree takes after my side of the family so those grandchildren will be lovely.” She paused, then gently rubbed her jaw. “Wish I could give Clay this toothache.”

I ignored most of her last comments because brilliance was hitting me. I snickered. “let’s start a business and make some money. Hit men. Doing away with Todd and Clay to

start. I wonder how much contract killers get for taking out bastards masquerading as human beings?"

"No idea. I don't remember reading that one in my 'Non-traditional Careers for Senior Actresses Who Can't Find a Bloody Job' book. May have simply missed it. Could be alphabetically sandwiched between Hiking Guide and Housekeeper."

"Hit Women for Hire. Would have to disguise the name of course."

We thought in silence for about thirty seconds. Then Babs beamed at me. "Got it. Killers-R-Us."

"No offense but that's a bit obvious. I'm thinking we should go for subtle, don't you?"

"You're right." Back to silence. Then Babs chuckled. "Okay. How's this? Ladies of the Night?"

"Hmm. That does have a rather elegant ring. Although, I'm not sure it succinctly states the objective of the business and does sort of smack of vampires."

"Okay okay. Gad, you're picky. But, hang on. I'm not through yet." Babs closed her eyes and let inspiration seize her. "Ha! I've got it. Sweet Cream Ladies. Limited."

I mulled this in my brain for about fifteen seconds before commenting, "Sounds a tad more like Hookers-R-Us than hired killers." I grinned at her. "But it's pretty. From the old Box Tops song?"

"Yep. Always thought it would have made a great feminist anthem. As to the hooker thing?" Babs snickered. "We expand our services. After all, we can't go out every night and whack someone. That could get messy. Not to mention if we added hooking we might actually get laid."

"You're fifty-eight. I'm fifty-five. Who the hell would pay us?"

"Now, now, Boots. It's a different world out there. Sixty is the new thirty so we're still super young. What the hell is wrong with you? You were always Peter Pan, now suddenly you're Dorian Gray?"

I exhaled. "Peter Pan. Damn. That really was me. The girl who would never grow up. Never grow old. There I was crowing and strutting and believing I could fly. And I did. But, you know what? Captain Hook found a new, young Wendy and then he launched a fatal attack across the bow. The little green tights and the little green chapeau are all that are left and I can't squeeze into them anymore. Peter Pan was murdered on a fine spring night in March. Peter Pan flies no more. Peter Pan is dead."

Babs stared at me. Then she laughed so hard she began to cough.

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "Too much?"

"Ya think? Honey, that was Melodrama Central crashing off the rails. But honestly, the age thing is just a number. Think about the sweet ladies from a business stand point. We're experienced. Tons of men would doubtless love to roll in the hay with someone who knew a move or two. Then we could expose the little creeps, tell their wives what they'd been up to and pocket more cash when the wives hire us to bump 'em off."

"Wow. I've known you over thirty years and never realized what a monetary, blood-thirsty wench you truly are. I love it!"

Babs raised her right eyebrow. "It's all for you, my friend. I'm over my urges to see Clayton Harrison the Third tarred, feather, disembowled and hanged from a Time Square billboard." She smiled sweetly. "Almost."

"Well, slap Todd Randolph Kittredge the first, only and hopefully the last, up there alongside Clay on that neon sign. Lousy adulterating, scheming, selfish no-good—slime."

“You left out lying bastard and career saboteur.”

“Goes without saying.” I paused. “Wait. Career saboteur? What do you mean? He didn’t go beyond chorus at the Met but he didn’t deliberately sabotage his own career.”

“No—just yours.”

I slowly placed my mug back down onto the table. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, hell. You don’t need this added to the angst in your life.”

“Yes, I do. Since theatre is supposedly my profession unless we get the hitman/hooker thing going, I kind of need to know whatever you know.”

She nodded, then signalled our waitress. “This calls for stronger stuff. Time to switch to Irish coffee. Which might help numb that irritating molar of mine on the left side. Anyway, after you’ve had a couple of good swigs, I’ll tell you what Chuck told me.”

We discussed other, non-lethal topics while we waited for the bartender at Reilly’s to pour a few snorts of whiskey into our coffee. Topics like religion and politics. Which, in actuality are quite non-lethal for Babs and me because we agree on both of them and can’t understand why the rest of the world simply doesn’t agree to disagree and move on. We discussed what might be causing Babs’s left molar to be inhibiting her ability to drink her coffee while it was hot. We discussed how gorgeous the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center was this year.

Our waitress, Molly O’ Something-Han, who’d been in the States for two whole weeks (so she informed us) set steaming mugs in front of us and added a fresh basket of Reilly’s famous raisin scones. Digressing slightly, but I love Sunday brunch at Reilly’s. No matter what you order—eggs, sausages, ham, kippers, Irish porridge, shepherd’s pie, fish & chips, or raisin scones alone—baskets of those raisin scones come with the meal. Along with two mimosas and all the coffee refills one desires. Obviously Babs felt more sustenance was needed for whatever she was about to share. I’ve known her forever. I trusted her to sense when alcohol was a vital addition to leaded hazelnut.

I took the three swigs Babs had encouraged, then set the mug on the table and leaned forward. “Spill.”

“Remember the last six years?”

“Not senile yet. I’d give that a yes.”

“Hush. Let me finish.”

“Fine.”

“Okay. For six years, you’ve been bitching that Chuck never sends you out for auditions. You assumed it was because he thought you weren’t right for anything.”

“I did. And Todd encouraged me in that assumption. It’s weird though. I’ve gone on more calls in the ten months I’ve been divorced than in those six years.”

Babs inhaled. “About a week ago Chuck told me that he had had plenty of auditions lined up for you that whole time. But Todd kept telling him and I quote, ‘Bootsie is ill and can’t read for any roles right now.’”

“Ill? What the heck ill? Other than the thirty-two pounds which, mind you, I did not start gaining until I married Todd, I don’t even get colds.”

“Chuck said that Todd implied this was more mental—as in ‘Bootsie’s in a fragile state and shouldn’t be put in positions where she’d have to deal with rejections.’”

I was stunned. Stunned quickly changed to blazing anger. “Why the flippin’, friggin’, fudgin’ hell didn’t Chuck say something?”

“Because he believed Todd. Who doesn’t, right? You did and you’re the smartest person on the planet. Chuck didn’t want to ask if you were one step away from committment to Bellevue in the straitjacket ward. I didn’t know ‘til Chuck became my own agent last year and he wasn’t even sure whether to tell me until a week ago. He finally figured out that Todd had indeed taken the art of prevaricating to a level that makes Wall Street tycoons look like pre-schoolers caught playing doctor.”

“Wow.” I leaned back and contemplated the ceiling, wondering whether I was a good enough actress to keep the tears that were piling up behind my eyelids from doing a major surge onto my cheeks. Babs wouldn’t mind but the rest of Reilly’s customers might be a little put off their brunches at the sight of a grown woman hysterically sobbing. I took a deep breath and managed to speak instead of cry. “So. Todd deliberately wrecked my career. Did you know that he kept telling me that Chuck didn’t think I was good enough to represent his agency. And after being married to Mr. Kittredge for six years my self-esteem had hit zero. So naturally I wasn’t going to call Chuck and ask if that were true. That bastard. I’m gonna kill him. Sweet Cream Ladies, Limited is on. Call Sing-Sing and reserve me a cell.”