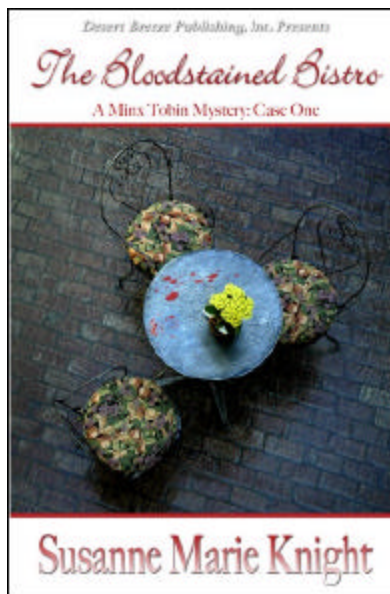


Excerpt of *The Bloodstained Bistro* Minx Tobin Murder Mystery Series--Case One



Eating at Valentin's Bistro can be hazardous to amateur detective Minx Tobin's health, so why does she continue to dine at this restaurant?

TO LIVE... AND DIE IN L.A.

Newly relocated Minx Tobin likes to help her friends. She also has a knack for solving puzzles. A huge puzzle in the form of a dead body soon gets dropped into her lap. Did waitress Brandi Evans murder her ex-boyfriend? Minx doesn't think so, but can she crack the Case of the Bloodstained Bistro?

Overworked homicide lieutenant Gabe Harris has his fill of women... and dead bodies. The women he can handle. The dead bodies-- unfortunately they keep piling up. But on this particular case he meets a young woman that not only impedes his investigation, but she also has no interest in him. A healthy ego like his can't handle that. He'll have to keep an eye on Ms. Minx Tobin.

Chapter One

"You should be a PI, Minx," the sassy blonde behind the Elite Exercise Emporium's customer counter called out.

Minx Tobin, fitness instructor and would-be private investigator -- at least according to

Sadie Durand -- approached the counter and set her exercise bag on top of it. "So you found your sunglasses then, Sadie?"

"Right where you predicted they'd be -- in the refrigerator." Sadie's frosty curls bounced as she vigorously nodded her head. "How in the world did you figure that?"

Minx checked the time on the overhead clock. As a new instructor to this facility, it wouldn't be appropriate to walk in late for her Amazing Abs class. But she did have a couple of minutes before it started.

Leaning over so her elbows rested on the glass countertop, she smiled at her friend. "If I tell you, you won't be flabbergasted anymore."

Her smile widened. A magician didn't reveal his secrets, so why should she?

Sadie would have none of it. She tapped her manicured nails on the glass top. "I'm the assistant manager here, in case you've forgotten, Ms. Tobin. One word from me, and you're out on the streets."

Her threat was lightened by a wink.

Minx relented. "Okay, I'll cry uncle. You told me yesterday that you went out early in the morning to the farmer's market. You picked out a sack of fresh apples."

"Uh, huh."

"So it was very sunny, hence the sunglasses," Minx continued. "You keep your apartment dark when you're gone, don't you? No lights, shades down..."

"Yeah, but--"

"And you also told me the phone rang just after you entered your apartment."
Sadie cocked her head. "So?"

Minx tried not to look smug. "Well, yesterday you said you'd searched everywhere for the glasses. All for naught. So in reconstructing the 'crime', I figured that in your hurry to answer the phone, you had to see where you were going. You immediately whipped off your sunglasses and put them in the only possible place -- in the bag of apples."

Sadie looked confused.

"You have no shelves or furniture between the front door and the phone." Minx had been to her friend's apartment once. Her memory, although not eidetic or photographic, was extremely reliable. "Since you were distracted, you put your produce in the frig without thinking." Minx wagged her rear end. "Voilà!"

"Nice view," a male voice commented from behind.

Minx whirled around, her ponytailed hair swishing against her nearly bare shoulders. Dallas Porter, the Emporium's resident hunk, stood checking out her bright yellow exercise outfit. Tall, tanned, and built, he was one hundred percent prime beef. The only problem was he knew it.

She wore more than most exercisers, with her long sports bra and capri pants, but still, she felt herself flush.

Placing her hands on hips, she gave him the once-over. "You talkin' to me?" She made her best Robert De Niro imitation.

Dallas grinned, showing off his perfect white teeth. "Who the hell else am I talkin' to? You're the only one here," he paraphrased from Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver.

"Hey! I'm here," Sadie allowed her displeasure to be known. "Don't you two have classes waiting for you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Minx took advantage of the distraction to escape her fellow instructor's steamy gaze. "See you later." She waved good-bye, then scooted toward the closed door marked 'Abs in Progress'.

Thirteen women and two men already waited for her. Her classes were usually small and she liked them that way -- so much easier to get to know each person and give individualized attention.

She said her hellos, glanced at the clock, then clapped her hands together. "Good morning! Are you ready for some serious ab work? Everyone have their mats? Yes? Then let's start with a simple warm-up."

With peppy music in the background, she led the group in a seated floor movement to loosen up the spine and midsection. As she called out the instructions, she glanced around at the participants reflected in the floor to ceiling mirrors.

She'd only been at this job one month but already she was familiar with the regulars. Mrs. Wynkoop always wore a kerchief on her greying hair. She dressed like a bag lady, but as membership to L.A.'s Elite Exercise Emporium wasn't cheap, the older woman must've had money stashed in her mattress.

Rosco Gomez, a stocky man in his fifties, was one of her favorites. The sheen of perspiration on his chrome dome couldn't diminish the beam of his wide grin.

Janice Olsson had no need for this particular class. Her six-pack abdominal muscles were

absolutely amazing already. Even Dallas drooled over Janice's abs whenever she walked around the Emporium.

And then there was Brandi Evans--

The music kicked up a notch. Time to switch into high gear. "Let's target those abs now." Minx lifted her hips off the mat. "Hold for a count of two, then lower it back down. Good. We'll do a set of ten, then two more sets. Remember, this is a very concentrated movement."

She turned her attention back to Brandi Evans. Brandi also had a figure to die for, but unlike Janice, Brandi had the complete package. Flowing red hair, pouty pink lips -- this young woman could've been described as a movie starlet, if that term was still used nowadays.

As red as Brandi's hair was, so were her eyes... red from crying.

Minx moved onto the next series of movements, this time focusing on the oblique side muscles, but continued to keep Brandi under observation. The woman's motions were jerky. She seemed nervous. Perhaps even fearful. She kept twisting her head to look back at the classroom door.

Forty-five minutes pass quickly when one's body and mind were engaged. Minx finished the session with cool-down exercises, then jumped up to land on her feet.

"Congratulations! You survived! And you're all on your way to having amazing abs." She patted her own bare midsection. "See you next time."

Her words were a signal for a mass exodus of tight, and not so tight, bodies. In the confusion, Minx made her way over to Brandi, hoping to catch the young woman before she left the workout room.

At Minx's tap on the shoulder, Brandi looked up. "Oh, hello." Her gaze darted left, then right, then settled on the wooden gymnasium floor.

Minx gave the woman a reassuring smile. "I couldn't help but notice that you seem troubled this morning, Brandi. Would you like to talk about it? How about over lunch?"

Brandi's pink lips trembled and she blinked back tears. "I think someone is trying to kill me."



"I don't make it a practice of having wine at lunch, but I think we both could use a glass." Minx picked up the wine menu offered at Valentin's, the trendy bistro two blocks south of

the Emporium. "How about something fruity and light? Do you like Zinfandel?"

Brandi Evans didn't bother with the menu. Instead, she slowly scanned the darkened interior of the restaurant. Although it was lunch hour, the many square tables arranged in the available floor space remained empty. Only three other couples took advantage of the eatery.

Evidently not seeing anyone or anything alarming, Brandi turned her watery green-eyed gaze on Minx.

"Sure, white's fine." She toyed with her cloth napkin. "Listen, I-I want to thank you for your kindness."

"No problem. We both have to eat, right?" Minx studied the food selection. "I've never tried this place before. What's good?"

"Everything. I work here, usually at night. The tips are good... when there's business." Brandi waved to the middle-aged man behind the bar in the back of the bistro. "That's the owner, Valentin Korvik. He makes everything fresh. Try the mushroom pie. It's heavenly."

A rather slovenly young woman approached the table to take the orders. More black hair escaped her chignon than was bound up by it. Her white blouse was hopelessly wrinkled, and the orange apron dirty.

In truth, the server's appearance didn't inspire confidence about the quality of Valentin's food.

"What'll it be." Instead of a question, the waitress' words were like a statement. She flicked her gaze over Minx to settle on Brandi. If looks could kill...

After taking the order, the server flounced back to the kitchen. But before the woman left, Minx could've sworn she heard a growl.

"That server doesn't like you, does she?"

Brandi shrugged. "Don't pay Yolanda Zabados any mind. She's just jealous, that's all. She thinks Valentin pays me special attention."

"Does he?"

"Maybe. A little. I don't know." Brandi shrugged again. Her big sigh seemed to indicate that she was steeped in her private world of pain.

Surprisingly, the food and wine arrived quickly. Yolanda further displayed her dislike by spilling some Zinfandel as she poured it into Brandi's goblet.

Minx frowned. The tip meter just plummeted.

She couldn't be disgruntled with the mushroom pie, though. It was like a quiche, cut into squares, and its swiss cheese aroma steamed upward to tease Minx's appetite.

She cut a slice with her fork, then nibbled on the edge. "Mmm, this is to die for."

Drat. Unfortunate word choice. Brandi blanched white.

Now was as good a time as any to learn what exactly was going on with the redhead.

She fortified herself with a sip of wine. "So, Brandi, what's been happening?"

Brandi also took a drink, but hers was a gulp. "It's a long story. It always is, isn't it?" She smiled sadly. "I came to L.A. two years ago. Wanted to be an actress." Her laugh had a harsh quality to it. "Original, isn't it? Who doesn't want to break into show business?"

Minx kept quiet. Show business was not the reason for her own move to the west coast six weeks ago from Babylon, Long Island.

"I met a guy, a real stud muffin," Brandi continued. "He told me he had connections. That he could set up an interview with a director." She studied the rim of her goblet. "I fell for him in a big way."

Minx understood completely. Men. Who could trust them? Escaping from the nightmare of a cheating fiancé was the reason for her flight to this side of the continent.

"He took pictures." Brandi's voice wobbled. She gulped down more wine. "You know what kind. I'm so very ashamed. After I realized he wasn't... interested in me, I tried to get the pictures back."

She sniffed into her linen napkin. "Money. That's all Neal wants. I paid him, but he wants more. No matter what, he always wants more."

Poor kid. Brandi Evans couldn't have been older than twenty three -- three years Minx's junior. Much too young to be involved in such a sordid affair.

Brandi's sigh was large enough to fill the room. "Turns out Neal's a gambler. That's why he's always after dough. I-I refused to pay anymore and told him I'd go to the police. That's when he started with the threats. First, to send pictures to my parents back in Ohio..."

A visible shudder rippled down the woman's slim shoulders and arms.

"Then came the near-misses with cars when I crossed the street. I'm afraid I'm not going to

be able to jump out of the way one of these days."

Strange how one's own woes seemed infinitesimal when compared with someone else's. Minx was certainly out of her league here. How could she advise this young woman? How could she help? If only she knew someone who dealt with this kind of situation.

As if invisible hands physically moved her head, Minx turned and noticed a couple of diners a few tables away from hers. She recognized the woman -- Ilsa Jacobson, a glamorous actress from daytime television.

Minx wasn't interested in her but her companion. The well-dressed man was older, but how much older was difficult to hazard a guess. His lean face appeared unlined, but his hair was an odd combination of dark and light grey -- a very distinctive mix. His broad shoulders signaled strength; his square jaw indicated determination. Even at this distance, she could feel the force of his cool blue eyes as he periodically swept his gaze around the bistro.

For some reason she felt drawn to him. Who knew why? Sure, he was good-looking, but L.A. seemed to be populated with drop dead gorgeous types. Maybe this man, whatever his occupation was, could help Brandi?

Quit daydreaming, Minx. Get your head back in the game.

Right. She turned back to her lunch partner's reddened eyes. "Do you have any really good friends here, Brandi? People you can talk to about this?"

The woman's answer was prompt. "No. I guess I kinda neglected socializing. Neal Loehman was everything to me." Her voice hardened. "That bastard."

That pretty much summed up Minx's experience with men as well.

Although the restaurant was still rather empty, Yolanda Zabados was prompt with dropping the bill on their table. Perhaps she wanted Brandi out the door ASAP.

Minx picked up the bill, glanced over the figures to verify the charges, then put her credit card down. She hoped she didn't appear distracted. Her mind kept churning over this unusual problem. How could she help Brandi Evans?

Brandi reached over and took Minx's hand. "Thank you. Not only for lunch, but for listening to me. It's been a big help. I-I feel better."

That was it. Talking. Oftentimes all a person had to do was talk about her situation, then she cheered up.

"Here." Minx opened her handbag and took out a pad and pen. She wrote as she talked.

"Here's my cell number. Just in case you need to get a load off."

Suddenly she felt her ponytail swishing against her back. She turned around and looked up. Dallas Porter grinned down at her. "Hey, Sphinx! How ya doin'? Couldn't resist giving your tail a swat."

She frowned. For a number of reasons, but focused on only one. Just because she had a peculiar name, she was a target for his ill-conceived humor. Not that he should be so picky. Dallas wasn't a common moniker, either.

"I was beginning to like this place... until you came in." She placed her hand over her unfinished cell number so he wouldn't see it.

He signaled to a woman walking out of the ladies room, then pointed to an empty table. Instead of leaving for the table, he continued to badger Minx. "Bad form, my little Egyptian statue. My date suggested Valentin's, and who am I to disappoint a lovely lady?"

Minx glanced at the 'lovely lady'. Dallas' lunch partner also happened to be a client at Elite Exercise Emporium. Charmaine Eggers wasn't enrolled in any of Minx's classes, but she stood out in a crowd of sweaty exercisers, probably because she liked to wear jewelry. Lots of it. Of the diamond and ruby variety.

Dallas gave Brandi a wink, then leaned over Minx's shoulder. "Givin' out your number, Sphinx? I'll take a copy."

Her hand still covering the paper, she retorted, "In your dreams, Porter."

While they were having this exchange, her grey-haired would-be Sir Galahad helped the actress from her chair. They walked by Minx's table, and the woman's high-heeled shoes click-clacked on the polished parquet wood floor. The sound continued to the door, then she and Sir Galahad walked out of the bistro.

And walked out of my life.

Get a grip. Minx firmly shut the door on her inappropriate thoughts.

Dallas grinned again, but there might have been a bit of steel behind his stormy grey eyes. "Your loss, Sphinx." He shrugged his muscular shoulders then made for easier game -- the woman in gems.

Minx made sure the waitress had returned the bill and credit card, then added in the tip -- only ten percent.

Brandi's attention wasn't focused on finances, but on butts -- Dallas'. Her gaze never

wavered from his body. Resting her elbow on the table, she sunk her chin in her hand. "He makes my mouth water."

Minx glanced over at Brandi, who almost drooled. "Down, girl, down! You need to finish your business with this Neal character before you start fixing your sights on yet another male prima donna."

Brandi blushed. "Yeah, you're right."

"Course I am." Minx handed over her phone number. "Listen, if something comes up and you want to talk, just give me a holler. And if I don't answer, leave a message, okay? I'll get back to you."

It honestly amazed her at how many people in the world hated to leave messages. Instead, they wasted their time by calling over and over again.

"Sure. Thanks again." Brandi stood and gave a tremulous little smile.

Minx followed suit, gladly leaving the hostile atmosphere of Valentin's behind, with Yolanda Zabados' glares and Dallas Porter's oily charm.

A warm gust of air greeted them as they stood on the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard. It was a lovely day, one of many in L.A. Too bad she had to get back to the Emporium.

After waving goodbye to Brandi, Minx continued down the street toward the gymnasium. She felt good. She'd done her good deed for the day. But taking on the woman's problems, even just that tiny amount, proved to be very draining. She hoped she could pump herself back up with her afternoon classes.

One thing was certain. Tonight, after she locked the door in her little apartment, she would plop down in her recliner, stretch out her legs, and totally relax.