

Chapter One

By the time the lunch rush started, Étienne was already dead.

Of course I didn't find out until later. While I was mixing up a nice vinaigrette, his life blood was leaking out onto the carpet of his hotel room. I imagined the scene during the following days, playing it over and over in the movie of my imagination, each time with a different villain, standing by and watching, aghast, mocking, sorry, gloating, surprised, coldly calculating. Each time the movie was a bit different. In the worst scenarios I was there, bursting open the door to hold him in my arms as his life leaked out and soaked into the floor. In none of the replays could I save his life.

I was making that excellent vinaigrette around ten-thirty that morning. Samuel had just switched off the West African music he is so fond of blaring as we prep for the day. We always turn it off when we open, letting the café sound system take over with an eclectic but serene mix of jazz and alternative rock. I was swaying to the music and whisking the salad dressing when the back door came open suddenly and slammed against the stand mixer.

"Hey, Alise, could I get some help here please?"

It was Justin, our regular Thursday bike messenger. I had only minutes before finished bagging the sandwich orders he was there to pick up. I turned to see why he was shouting. Bloody on both knees, he was cradling his left wrist in his right hand.

My stomach lurched. "Oh no, what happened?" I covered the food prep area, grabbed some clean paper towels and led him to the office. "Don't drip on my floor." I refrained from telling him that he was a walking OSHA violation.

"Some idiot ran me off the road," he said, flopping into the old office chair. "I was heading up the alley, and this van just speeds through going the other direction. Didn't even look. I swerved and skidded into the brick wall. Stupid van hit the dumpster and kept on going."

"Let's get you cleaned up." I wiped the blood off, and went to get more paper towels and a first aid kit. Justin was in his early twenties but seemed much younger to me, especially bruised and bleeding as he was. I played Florence Nightingale and he continued to complain. His knees and elbow were scraped and bloody, but not seriously injured. His wrist was already swollen and getting worse - probably broken. As I bandaged him up I noticed his rock-hard calf muscles. Bike riding for a living does wonders for the physique. I got him some ice in a plastic bag for his wrist, wrapped a clean towel around it, and went out in front to talk to Jodi. Samuel, my business partner in the café, was working the register.

"Would you take my car and deliver the sandwiches?" I asked her quietly so the customers

wouldn't hear. "Justin's pretty badly hurt. I think he might have broken his wrist."

"Sure thing, boss," Jodi answered. She took my keys.

Justin limped out, holding his wrapped wrist. "I can do it, Alise. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Justin, look at you!" I said.

"No way," Jodi agreed. "You're all broken and bloody. Your wrist is swollen. You need to see a doctor."

"You need to get that wrist x-rayed. And you should file a police report," I told him.

He winced in pain. "And say what? That a car almost hit me, don't know what kind, can't remember the license number except for a Q and some N's, didn't see the driver?" He shook his head. "The cops are never gonna catch the guy."

"Can you describe the car?" I asked.

"White van," he said, and looked at me disdainfully. "Like there aren't a thousand white vans in Sac on any given day."

"What kind of van? A delivery van? Come on, Justin, you really should report it," I said.

"Yeah, delivery van, no back windows," he said. "They'll never find the driver. The cops won't care anyway. It's not like they killed me." Those words came chillingly back to me later, when I heard about Étienne.

"Was there anything written on the side?" I asked. "A company name? What kind of bumper did it have?"

"No company name. Probably grill damage from the dumpster, and from my bike. It's pretty messed up." He gave me a look that said it was time to stop asking questions.

I gave that look right back to him, and handed Jodi a piece of paper. "Here are the addresses for the orders."

"I can do it," Justin said, starting to stand up. "My bike's messed up, but I can still ride it."

"No you can't!" Jodi and I both said together. Samuel looked over from the register. So did the customer he was ringing up.

"Why don't you go with her?" Samuel called from the register in his musical African voice.

"I'm fine," Justin said.

The transaction completed, Samuel sauntered toward us. Samuel, over six foot four, with a shaved head and rich basso voice, was used to being listened to. "You got a broken wrist there, brother," he said. He seemed to convince Justin, or at least end the argument. "We'll call City Flyers, let them know you're injured and goin' to the hospital. You were hurt on the job, so they need to know." Samuel went back to the counter to take care of a new customer. "That's worker's comp, you know."

Jodi handed Justin a couple of Advil and a glass of water. He started to let go of the wrist and winced. She held the pills so he could suck them in, then held the glass to his lips so he could take a sip. The adoring look on her face, and his obliviousness, told me more than I wanted to know about the two of them. I caught her eye and she blushed.

"How are you going to play Saturday, buddy, with your wrist like that?" I asked him and immediately regretted it. His face fell.

“I’ll be fine.” He looked miserable. He was scheduled to perform at the café Saturday night, his first paying gig. My heart broke for him. I remembered what it was like getting paid to perform for the first time.

“Let’s worry about that later,” I said. “Maybe you’re not broken.” All four of us looked doubtful. “Worse comes to worst, I’ll play with you.”

“That would be awesome,” he said. “You’re like a pro and everything. Even out of practice you would be great.”

“Just like a pro,” I said with a lopsided grin. I made a mental note to dig my Grammy out of the cardboard box in the closet and show him some time.

Justin limped out to the car with Jodi and I put a box full of orders into the back seat. I helped him on with his seatbelt and ruffled his spiky hair. He looked up at me from the passenger seat with a pained smile. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

“Jodi’s taking you to the hospital. Thank her.” She blushed again and shot me a look. I slammed the car door and went back into the restaurant.

What a day, I thought as I worked the grill distractedly for the lunch crowd. In this new phase of my life, I lead a fairly boring existence, and I like it that way. Sometimes I miss the excitement of my former life as a globe-trotting musician, but mostly I wrap the peace and quiet around me like a comfortable quilt and revel in the ordinariness.

Our place opens at six in the morning to fulfill the caffeine needs of the stream of civil servants trudging to work on weekdays. We close at four after the lunch crowd has gone back to work. This means that Samuel and I can have some semblance of lives, and still turn enough of a profit to pay Jodi and ourselves and make the lease on our small place each month.

It was late afternoon, the place was just about empty, and I was washing our last load of dishes before shutting the doors. In walked my favorite cop-customer and his partner. I say my favorite because we have lots of cops who come to the café, and they are a good group of customers, and most of them are fit, handsome, and very polite. We’re close to the courthouse and the police station. Generally, we have a great crowd of customers. This one, Detective Nick Lozado, was my favorite in a high-quality field.

Amazing green eyes. Broad shoulders. Gun bulge under left arm. Buses his dishes.

Up to this point our conversations had consisted almost entirely of ordering food and taking his debit card (which is why I knew his name), but a gal has to have something to look forward to besides fresh veggie deliveries. This guy coming in for lunch was a definite plus in my day.

He and his younger partner, Brad Rogers (again with the debit cards) ate here together a couple of times a week. Rogers was a tall, squarely-built guy with a crew cut that screams ex-Marine. I had seen a picture of a wife and baby in his wallet when he paid for his meals, and a gold band on his left hand.

There was no such picture or ring in Detective Nick’s situation as far as I could tell. Not that I was looking.

The two detectives walked up to the counter, where Samuel stood ready to take their order. They weren’t there for coffee today. I could see them from the kitchen sink in the back as I hosed

off the lunch plates and stacked them in the tray. I could see all three of them glance in my direction, and my heart did a little skip. It's hard to get over that feeling when a cop looks at you that you must be in trouble.

"Alise?" Samuel called. His voice sounded serious. "These men need to speak with you." I dried off my hands and went out to talk to them.

I doubted the good-looking detective was going to ask me out on a date with his partner here. Samuel's look led me to think this wasn't a social call.

"You are Alise Kelley Le Goff?" the younger detective asked. I nodded. "Étienne Le Goff is your husband?"

"Ex-husband," I said. The cold finger of dread ran down my spine.

The detective met my eyes intently. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, ma'am." He cleared his throat. "Étienne Le Goff was found dead this morning. He was the victim of a homicide."

I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, and I thought for a second that I might be one of those frail, delicate women who faints when she hears shocking news. I had just enough presence of mind to grab the counter with one hand. Samuel took my other arm and led me to the closest table. A moment later I had a cup of tea in front of me. Samuel brought the detectives coffee.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Stabbed," Detective Rogers answered. His voice sounded tinny and far away. "In his hotel room at the Governor Hotel."

"When?" I asked.

"Sometime this morning." He pulled out a little brown leather notebook, consulted it, then met my eyes again. "The hotel management got a call at eleven-thirty that he was late for rehearsal. They went in and found him."

"Was it a robbery?" I heard myself ask. I saw in my mind a horrible scene - a struggle, a room splattered with Etienne's blood, him sprawled and eviscerated on the floor. I gulped and closed my eyes.

"We don't think so. He had ordered room service about nine forty-five. The food was delivered at ten, and he asked for an extra coffee cup. Whoever killed him, it looks like he may have let 'em in."

"He had only been in town since yesterday," I said. I wanted to ask more questions, but my thoughts were mushy and disjointed, and I felt like I might throw up.

Rogers made a note in his little book. "We're not ruling anything out at this point. We're looking for anyone who might have had access to the room, including transients, other guests, hotel staff, friends, family members." He looked pointedly at me. "He was still wearing his watch and had money in his wallet. There was no sign of a struggle."

The other detective, the one with the green eyes, stirred his coffee slowly, waiting for me to take in the information. After a minute he said, "I'm sorry for your loss. You said ex-husband. You were divorced?"

That sounded so harsh, especially after the night before. "We were in the process of divorcing," I said. "I left him in France two years ago. I moved back here. I'm not really sure

what the legal situation is right now.” I thought about Étienne’s face, his eyes, his hair, that I had so recently run my fingers through. It didn’t make any sense that he was dead. Stabbed. Those eyes would never sparkle again? Impossible. I felt tears pushing at the back of my eyeballs. My head started to throb.

I pushed the tea out of the way and put my head on the table. I made a weird, embarrassing kind of whiny cry. The table rattled. The green-eyed detective, Lozado, the one I was beginning to think of as the sensitive one, picked up the cups so they wouldn’t spill.

Samuel came over and placed a chair next to mine. He sat with the chair back between his legs and took my hand. He wrapped my little hand in both of his giant ones and rested it on his knee. Eventually I lifted my head and used a napkin to wipe my nose and eyes.

“Who would do such a thing?” I asked.

“We don’t know yet, but we’ll find out,” Detective Lozado said. He paused. “We do need someone to identify the body. According to the information we have so far, you’re still officially married. That makes you his next of kin in the U.S.”

I thought for a minute of Étienne’s mother and sisters, and how devastated they would be to hear that he was dead. He was a generous, charming, devoted, talented, beautiful son and brother. So he was a philanderer. He still had many excellent qualities. He didn’t deserve to be dead. Dead. I couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

Rogers flipped open a little notebook, clicked his pen. “We know he arrived in town yesterday at ten in the morning. United Flight 782 from Denver to Sacramento, with a stop in Los Angeles. We’re piecing together a time line. He came alone on the flight from Denver. Most of the musicians and crew came in on a later flight. His manager, François - “ he studied his notes - “Arch-am-box -”

“Archambaux. France-WAH. ARSH-um-BOW.” This guy was clearly no master of French pronunciation.

“Right. And a woman, Mariel Des -”

“Desmarais. DAY-muh-ray.” I tried to give it to him in a way that he would be able to reproduce. “She’s a mezzo-soprano who tours with him sometimes. I think he’s billing her as a special guest this tour. She started as his backup singer.” I didn’t add my own commentary - that she was one of several women in his life, that her relationship with him predated mine and continued after we broke up. I didn’t think it would be prudent to color their investigation with irrelevant gossip. Besides, they were detectives. They could figure it out.

“Right. DAY-muh-ray.” He looked at me for confirmation. Close enough. “There were twenty-two others, cast and crew. They arrived on a flight this morning. When was the last time you saw him?”

Detective Rogers had a suspicious tone that made me uncomfortable. Did he think I had something to do with Étienne’s death? I didn’t want to tell them that I had slept with my not-ex-husband. For reasons I chose not to explore, I especially didn’t want to say it to Detective Lozado, silent at the table. One man in two years, and I happen to be married to him, but I really didn’t want to talk about it.

“We had dinner last night,” I said. That’s it. Just dinner.

“You didn’t see him today?” he asked. I shook my head. I may have blushed. I should have been honest, but I was embarrassed somehow that I had slept with this guy who had treated me pretty shabbily in the past. I certainly didn’t feel like explaining it to this unfriendly cop. Or to his good-looking partner. I felt Samuel squeeze my hand.

“What time did you get here this morning?” Rogers asked.

“About ten,” I said.

“And you’ve been here all day?” I nodded. They both looked at Samuel, who nodded confirmation. My alibi, I suppose.

Both cops stood. Rogers made some notes in his book, closed it, put it in his pocket. He headed toward the door. Lozado stayed near the table where I sat, still clutching Samuel’s hand. “We’re going to need you to identify the body,” he said in a much gentler voice than Rogers had used with me. “I am truly sorry for your loss.” He held out a card with the address of the morgue. I looked dumbly at it. Samuel took it from him, thanked him. I put my head on the table. “It’s best if she doesn’t have to go alone.”

“I will take her there,” he said firmly, and squeezed my hand again.

After the detectives left, Samuel put his arm around my shoulder, and said, “Let’s do this.” He had already turned off the burners and coffee machines. He quickly finished all the essential closing procedures and locked the doors.

“The dishes,” I said lamely. “I didn’t finish.”

“The dishes can wait.”

We drove in his truck to a rectangular concrete building and pulled into a metered spot. We signed in at the front desk. Samuel and I were the only ones on the customer side of the counter.

A tall gray-haired woman in a white coat gave me a clipboard full of forms to sign and initial. Then she led us down a long hallway that seemed like the locker room from my junior high. We arrived in a brightly lit room with metal table. She flipped back a sheet to show us Étienne’s body. I nodded my head. “That’s him,” I said and looked away. I took a deep breath, then looked at his face again. The eyes were closed and his skin was waxy-looking. The dark stubble on his chin stood out against the paleness of his normally olive skin. He hadn’t shaved. We had laughed together about how his female fans prefer him unshaven. I reached out and touched his dark hair. Wavy and soft, it felt the same as it had that morning.

He had left my house just this morning in a brown dress shirt from dinner the night before, wearing the gold cross on a chain I had given him as a wedding present. He lay now on the table, unclothed except for the pale blue sheet. His face looked empty, cheeks sunken, eyelids slightly purple. “Can I see . . .” I asked the woman. She pulled the sheet back further.

His tattoo of the flag of Brittany, the *glenn ha du*, looked strangely the same as it had the night before, on the left side of his chest. Close to his heart, he always said. The triskelion, three ornate curves forming a triangle in the center, was on his right shoulder. Just below the breastbone, a gash showed where the knife had gone in. One thrust, only a few inches wide, but deep enough to pierce his heart. The edges were jagged and the wound was more round than just

the slit I would have expected. Whoever had stabbed him had twisted the blade as it went in. I took a step back. The woman in the white coat covered him again.

After I signed some more forms, Samuel took me back home. Yelena was in her car in a space in front of the house, dressed in her stockbroker suit and heels. She had obviously just pulled up. She jumped out and exchanged a look with Samuel. Then she wrapped her arms around me and I started sobbing.

The rest of the night is a bit of a blur, but I remember opening a bottle of Beaujolais (2005, a good year for wine, and the year we met) and popping a CD of Étienne's into the stereo. There must have been more than one bottle, and a lot of tears, and at some point Yelena changed into a pair of my old sweats. I woke up some time in the middle of the night on the couch in my living room, covered by my comforter and still clutching the CD case in my hand. Yelena was on the floor, curled up in my sleeping bag. I got up, stepping carefully over the sleeping Yelena, got myself a glass of water from the sink, and went back to the couch. I hoped all of this was a dream, but knew it wasn't. And some time tomorrow (today, I suppose, technically), I would have to explain to those detectives that I hadn't told them the whole truth.

I thought back to how strange the day before had been. Justin's hit-and-run on the bike wasn't the beginning of the craziness for me that Thursday. I guess the craziness started the evening before, when I agreed to dinner with Étienne. I thought he was my ex-husband, but it turns out we never finished the paperwork. Definitely my ex, though. I had thought I was done with him. I thought we were just going out for a friendly dinner. When Étienne was involved, my life never went quite as planned.

Étienne, for a while at least, had been that comfortable blanket I pulled around myself. I was naive and idealistic when I met him, and grew up in ways I didn't want to because of him. I also learned a lot about life. I suppose it is true that our past makes us who we are, and that happens whether we want it to or not. "That which does not kill us makes us stronger," according to Nietzsche. Awesome.

About a dozen years ago I was scraping together a living as a musician and working in a restaurant in San Francisco when I got an opportunity to tour as the opening act with an almost-famous folk rock group that has since sunk into oblivion. I played several instruments and sang. Most of my stuff was traditional Celtic dancing songs and ballads, but I played some of my own songs as well. The band that gave me my break broke up - petty squabbles, maybe too much success, maybe too little. I kept getting gigs.

I continued to travel as a solo act, touring the United States with my little guitar, *bodhrán* and a bar stool, singing songs about lost love, ancient wars, and the hills of Killarney. Sometimes I was the headliner, but more often I opened the show or performed at Celtic and folk music festivals. It's a chummy community, and there was plenty of work if I didn't mind cozy accommodations. I was in my early twenties, so I didn't put too much stock in bodily comfort, and I had a lot of fun and plenty of excitement. I made enough to keep doing it, and made a lot of great friends along the way.

Through some of these good friends I got an offer to tour throughout Europe, which opened my eyes to the rest of the world and changed my life. I made lots more friends - talented, amazing, self-centered, hard-working, fantastic people, made money, lost money, got stuck at train stations with only my guitar and a city map in a language I don't speak. At some point I ended up in France, met a beautiful man, and fell in love. He was talented, famous in Europe, and attracted to me. Passionate, gorgeous, and devoted. He was an inventive, thoughtful lover, much more experienced than I. We traveled and performed in small clubs and big ones, cities and resorts, stayed in elegant hotels (when his record label was paying) and little *pensiones* (when on our own), and had a wonderful, romantic time playing music and seeing the world.

I married Étienne, and I thought we were happy. I was completely crazy for him, and I thought it was mutual. Then I learned that he was sleeping with his backup singer, and quite a list of other women. I packed my bag, grabbed my guitar, mandolin and *bodhrán* and took a train to Paris. As quickly as I could I caught a 787 back to the States.

I ended up in Sacramento, California, and decided I liked it here. It's a couple of hours from San Francisco, but still close enough to have some decent night life and entertainment. It seemed like a good place to make a life. I met Samuel through some music friends, and since I had a little money saved, and he needed a business partner, I invested in the café. Samuel is a big, bald teddy bear of a man who left Sierra Leone as a teenage refugee and has become a savvy business owner and social activist. He is ten years older than me and about a hundred years wiser.

We named the café *Beaumonde* - Beautiful World in French. I was a pretty passable cook to begin with, and I have gotten better with practice. Samuel is a creative genius in the kitchen, and does wonders with menu and ingredients. Together we're better, in culinary terms, than either of us would be separately. We have gotten good reviews from some ordinarily harsh critics in the local and regional papers. We've made a decent success of the business in the last two years. We turn a small profit, and our suppliers get paid on time.

That is the story of my brief career as a folk-rock singer, and my transition to restaurateur. I still get some little checks from songs I wrote for myself and others. According to my agent a couple of my singles are still quite popular in Canada and Belgium. The little trickle of cash has helped keep the restaurant afloat in the rough months, which come less frequently these days.

I also bought a two story Victorian house which has been converted to flats. Upstairs is my renter and best friend Yelena - stockbroker and fashion maven. She grew up in Bosnia until she was eleven and then moved here with her family to get away from war. She helps keep daily minor disasters in perspective for me. In Yelena's world, if it's not exploding or on fire, it's not an emergency. We both lost our fathers young - Yelena to a roadside bomb, me to a climbing accident. A shrink might say that early loss cemented the bond between us. Whatever. She's the best renter and friend a gal could ever hope to have.

I never saw a lawyer in Paris when I left Étienne, and we had one brief phone call after I left in which he said that he would start the divorce papers. He said he didn't want to, that he hoped we could work things out. I had said no to working things out, but I never followed up. I had not had any reason to check on the status of the paperwork. I sort of figured that we were no longer

married, and that someday I would get a sheaf of papers in the mail telling me I was single again. I hadn't even dated in the last two years. Once burned, twice shy. Something like that.

When Étienne had scheduled engagements in northern California, I realized that I both dreaded and hoped that I might see him. I had checked his website and found his tour dates - New York, Chicago, Denver, Sacramento, San Francisco, Seattle. I had been a little on edge wondering if he remembered me or cared, and then he called me and arranged to come see me. We had a casual dinner (during which his hazel eyes sparkled dangerously in the candlelight). My studied cool lasted halfway through the main course. After dinner there was a kiss, which led to drinks back at my place, which led to an interlude on the floor of my living room, which led to the bedroom. You get the picture.

Next morning, over a breakfast of yogurt and strawberries, I remembered why I had left him in the first place. He was a self-centered, arrogant, condescending man, but what a kisser. When he finally hopped into his rented black Mustang and I watched him drive off, I breathed a sigh of equal parts regret and relief. Over him? Maybe. Sure that leaving him was the right decision? Oh, yeah. It was what a therapist would call closure, I suppose, and my worldly friend Yelena would call "goodbye sex." *Au revoir*, you beautiful, inconstant man, I thought. Your groupies can have you. May we both have happy lives.

Getting ready for work, I had noticed something stuck under the wedding photo on my mantel. I know, pathetic to keep my wedding photo on the mantel. I had more good memories than bad of that time in my life, and Yelena and I had made enough jokes about Frenchmen and affairs that my hard feelings were softened. Obviously - I had just slept with the man who had broken my heart. The heart and the rest of me was feeling pretty good, all things considered.

Under the photo was a note, written on blue paper from the desk in my room. I smiled - lyrics from a song Étienne wrote and recorded in Europe. The words were French, and said something along the lines of "I'll love you forever." Yeah, we'll see. I thought. My heart was mended, but I wasn't putting much stock in Étienne ever being monogamous. He loves me forever, maybe, but I wasn't prepared to be one of a harem. *Adieu, mon amour*.

I had rolled into the café about ten the morning Etienne died, and Samuel was behind the counter filling the pastry case. He opens most mornings, and I usually stay until closing. We have one employee, Jodi. With the three of us working at our busiest times we seem to get by all right. When we need extra help there always seem to be available cousins and nephews from Samuel's extended family who fill in for us.

"How's it going?" Samuel had asked me in his musical way. His Afro-French accent makes everything he says sound like a song. If chocolate had a voice, it would sound like Samuel. "Got yourself a boyfriend, don't you?"

I had given him a cryptic smile. I am used to it by now - nothing I do is a secret from Samuel. He can read my thoughts no matter how I try to hide them. I had gone in the back and started prepping for the lunch rush. Then our favorite bike messenger was nearly run over, my ex-husband was stabbed, and my day pretty much spiraled downward from there.

So Étienne had somehow gotten himself killed after leaving my house that morning. He had

been scheduled to perform in downtown Sacramento that evening. He was a French citizen, with me as his only tie to the area, as far as I knew.

Talented, beautiful, egotistical, affectionate. Dead. I couldn't wrap my mind around it.