

JORDAN POINT

CHAPTER ONE

I didn't recognize the name that had appeared overnight in the 2PM slot in Monday's electronic calendar: *Sylvie Reynaud*. Exotic. Obviously French, I thought. My late mother's roots could be traced back to the early Huguenot migration to the South Carolina coast, and our antebellum home on St. Helena Island just off Beaufort is named Presqu'isle, so I had some background.

Later, I felt a little embarrassed that I hadn't made the connection immediately.

At the time, however, the appointment simply seemed an annoyance, another example of the Universe piling on. I guess I should have expected it since my life had been purring along quite well of late, thank you very much. My husband's ex-wife had successfully completed her round of chemo with very hopeful results, so things were sort of back to normal for his two kids. Their weekend visits had resumed, with a lot of the tension having eased over the past couple of months.

After the defection of Stephanie Wyler the previous fall, Simpson & Tanner, Inquiry Agents had been prospering, relatively speaking, on a number of fronts. Our clients had been mostly white-collar or institutional, a little boring sometimes, but also devoid of anything resembling danger. I figured that would make my partner Erik Whiteside very happy, not to mention my husband and somewhat reluctant employee. As a former sheriff's officer, Red had had his fill of drug deals, Saturday night bar brawls, and the general mayhem created by the annual influx of over two million tourists to our home base, Hilton Head Island.

On that particular Monday morning, Red and I had arrived together as we usually did, although in separate cars. It often fell to my husband to do the legwork if a case required it, so we tried to make sure we were both mobile at any given moment.

Sharese Thomason, our new receptionist, greeted us with her customary pleasant smile and steaming cups of caffeine. When Stephanie had suddenly bolted to Arizona, Sharese's had been the first name that popped into my head. I'd encountered her working at a bank that employed a teller who had come under scrutiny in the disappearance of one of our clients. I'd been impressed with her appearance and demeanor, and it hadn't taken much to woo her away from a job that, at least on the surface, had appeared both boring and unchallenging.

I smiled back and picked up my chai tea latte. "Good morning." I took a sip, realized it was still terrifically hot, and headed for my office.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tanner. Sergeant."

Sharese felt Red's former title a suitable one for his position in the firm, I guessed, and she used it unfailingly.

"How was your weekend?" My husband always stopped to chat, inquiring about our new employee's boyfriend, an earnest young man we'd met on a couple of occasions. He was just finishing his business degree at the USC campus at New River, out on the highway between Hilton Head and Beaufort, and a summer wedding had been hinted at. Providing he found a job after graduation, a dicey proposition in these challenging times.

"Fine. Byron needed to work on a paper, so we just hung around his condo. At least it was warm enough for me to get in a nice long walk on the beach."

“Good for you. It’s been a nasty winter.”

Red followed me into the office and settled on one of the client chairs. A few seconds later, Erik wandered in and took up residence on the other.

“How’re you doing?” I always asked, although I could tell that Stephanie’s desertion still weighed heavily on him. Lanky and thin by nature, Erik had lost some weight he couldn’t afford along with the ready smile that had always seemed a large part of his boyish charm.

He shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Played tennis most of the weekend. A couple of guys I knew in Charlotte were down visiting, so we batted it around a little. Nothing special.”

Besides being our receptionist and part-time operative—not to mention the daughter of my late partner Ben Wyler—Stephanie had also been Erik’s fiancée. Even after all these months, he still hadn’t recovered. I’d counseled him to give her time, but as far as I could tell, she had yet to be in touch. Other than to return the ring, an act of honesty that gave me hope.

I mentally shook myself and turned on my iPad, a Christmas gift from Red. Being a confirmed technophobe, I had at first resisted. It had taken me only a couple of days to fall madly in love with the little gadget in a way I never had with my laptop or smart phone. That’s when I noticed the appointment that had been added to my calendar app. It for sure hadn’t been there on Friday, the last time I’d allowed business to intrude.

I buzzed the front desk.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Who’s this Sylvie Reynaud, my two o’clock?”

“Oh, sorry, I meant to tell you about that the moment you walked in. She left a message with the service, and I picked it up first thing this morning. She sounded pretty upset, and you didn’t have anything scheduled, so I just slotted her in.” A pause. “I hope that was okay.”

I sighed. I’d planned to put in an appearance and then head up to Presqu’isle. I’d had a very unsatisfactory conversation with Lavinia Smalls, my caregiver since childhood and now the old mansion’s sole resident. Except of course for Julia, but that was another story entirely. Our weekly Sunday chat had been strained, and the lump of anxiety that never wandered far from the center of my chest had slipped easily back into place the moment I hung up the phone.

Still, business was business, as my late father the Judge had often reminded me. We had founded the agency together, more as a lark than as a serious endeavor, but it had quickly become a source of livelihood for both Erik and Stephanie. And now Red and Sharese. Our reputation for integrity had been hard-won, and we gave every case we accepted our full effort and commitment. Even the ones I secretly wanted to slither out from under.

“She couldn’t come in any earlier? I had plans to be out of the office this afternoon.”

“I can call and ask. She left her cell number.”

I glanced at my watch. “Yes, do that, would you please? If she could make it before noon that would be great.”

“I’ll call her now.”

“Thanks.” I turned to the men waiting patiently in front of my desk. “How about you two? Anything shaking?”

Erik forced a tentative smile. “I’m still working on collating the information for the women’s shelter’s attorneys. Roy Don Rymer’s trial starts next week.”

The wife beater, abuser of his own children. I’d been so pleased when Erik’s computer skills had enabled him to backtrack the threatening emails to this moron’s home computer. Almost

simultaneously, Rymer had confronted the shelter's founder, demanding to know where she had hidden his family. Having 911 on speed dial had probably saved the woman from a beating of her own, and prompt response from the Beaufort police had put the slimeball behind bars. Erik's testimony would cement the case against him, and he'd at least go down for menacing and some as yet unspecified computer crimes. Certainly not anywhere near what he deserved, but maybe it would give his wife and children some breathing space, a chance to relocate while Rymer cooled his heels in jail.

"If you need help, you know you can call on Sharese. She certainly isn't in your league when it comes to the cyber stuff, but she's a whiz on the keyboard." I cut off what I knew would be some reference to his vanished fiancée. "I know she's not as good as Stephanie, but you need to give her a chance, Erik. We're paying her good money. You might as well make use of the skills she brings to the table."

"You're right," he mumbled. "Anything else?"

"I guess not."

With a nod, he rose and moved back toward the screen that provided him some privacy from the comings and goings in the main reception area. One of these days, I thought, watching his bent shoulders, he's going to have to get over her. I voiced as much to my husband once Erik was out of earshot.

"Give him time."

"He's had time. That was November, and it's nearly St. Patrick's Day. I don't think she's coming back." Red didn't respond. "Do you?"

"Probably not. But hope dies hard." He smiled up at me. "As it should."

I knew his reference was to his own dogged pursuit of me after his brother—my first husband—was murdered by the drug cartel he'd been investigating for the state attorney general's office. Sometimes the vivid nightmare of his plane exploding on takeoff, showering me with hot metal and anguish, seemed as real as the day it happened.

"I suppose. But I miss the old Erik. He has to force himself to smile. It makes me sad."

Red reached across the desk and took my hand. I squeezed back, glad of his understanding.

"I'm going to head out in a few minutes," he said. "I'm meeting Malik for coffee when he takes his break, see if he's come up with anything on that guy we're trying to run down for Mrs. Tennyson."

"The gardener? I was hoping she'd decided to let it go. I told her she's going to end up spending more on our fees than he supposedly took out of her wallet."

"You're not convinced it was even him, are you?" My husband ran a hand through his thick brown hair in an unconscious gesture that always reminded me of his dead brother.

"Nope. You haven't met her son. Or his friends."

"Well, you could be right, but there's no way she's going to accuse Junior. Much easier to try and nail the Hispanic laborer than her snotty kid."

"Let's just drop the case. I don't much like her."

My husband laughed. "Really? I'd never have guessed."

I returned his smile. "I get that we don't have to like the client. My rule, if you recall. There's just . . . something sort of smarmy about her, know what I mean? She's perfectly willing to lay the blame on some poor working guy when the problem is almost certainly closer to home. You said the kid's been in trouble before."

“According to Malik. That’s one of the reasons the sheriff has been dragging his feet a little about trying to locate the gardener. But you know what they say: Money talks and bull—”

Red bit off the rest at Sharese’s sudden appearance.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I have Ms. Reynaud on the line. She wants to know if she can come right now.”

I checked my watch. Even if it took an hour, I could still get to Presqu’isle by early afternoon. Maybe I could even mooch lunch from Lavinia.

“Fine. Tell her to come on in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Red and I exchanged a grin as Sharese returned to her desk. “I hate being called *ma’am*. It makes me feel about a hundred years old.”

“What can you do? Her mama raised her right.” He rose. “Anyway, I’ll see you later on. If we don’t make connections, I’ll be home probably before you are. What’s happening for dinner?”

“Your call,” I said, stacking the file folders on my desk into a couple of neat piles. “Surprise me.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” he said and waved on his way out.

At least that part of my life was back on track. I spared a moment to think about what I might find at Presqu’isle, then shoved that into one of my convenient mental compartments when the front door opened. I caught a glimpse of a tall, willowy woman in baggy cotton trousers, a brightly jeweled T-shirt, and sparkling gold flip-flops. A mane of startling red hair cascaded down her back as she turned to close the door behind her.

She must have been lurking in the parking lot, I thought, and leaned back in my chair.

“Sylvie Reynaud for Mrs. Tanner.”

“Of . . . of course,” Sharese replied shakily.

Who was this woman that the voice of my usually imperturbable receptionist should be quivering in . . . fear? Awe? I craned my head a little, trying to see without being seen, when Sharese stepped into my line of vision.

“Mrs. Tanner, your appointment is here. Shall—?”

The tall redhead expertly inched her way past and displaced Sharese in the doorway. I opened my mouth to protest her rudeness when she stopped me in my tracks.

“Hey, Bay Rum, what’s shakin’?”

A hearty laugh followed, one that took me back a few decades. To middle school. To three or four gawky preteens huddled in the girls’ bathroom, sharing a forbidden cigarette.

For a moment, I refused to believe this exotic creature filling my doorway could be—

“Pudge?” I almost couldn’t get the word out, it seemed so impossible.

“In the flesh. And a lot less of it than the last time I saw you, *n’est-ce pas?*”

And Sylvia Reynolds, aka Pudge, apparently also aka Sylvie Reynaud, pirouetted once, then plopped into the client chair.