

THE INCUMBENT CORONER

BOOK TWO
OF THE
FENWAY STEVENSON
MYSTERIES

PAUL AUSTIN ARDOIN

THE INCUMBENT CORONER
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PART I



THE WEEK BEFORE

CHAPTER ONE



FENWAY STEVENSON SAT ON THE COUCH IN HER APARTMENT. She didn't know what she was going to do for dinner, but she didn't care. The morning had been spent on an overdose victim in the foothills, the afternoon on the mountain of paperwork that threatened to take over her desk, and she was tired. This was the first night in a week she had left the office by eight o'clock. She picked up the remote and plopped her feet on the coffee table.

The doorbell rang.

Fenway blinked a couple of times before getting up. She opened the door.

Dez stood there, still in her black Dominguez County Sheriff's Department uniform, holding a six-pack of beer.

"Hey," Dez said. "I know I didn't call first, but I was in the neighborhood."

"We just saw each other at work an hour ago, Dez. This can't wait till tomorrow?"

"I guess it could have," Dez said, stepping inside. "But I wanted to let you know in person. The paperwork came back in right after you left. HR approved your vacation for next week."

“Oh.” Fenway hadn’t counted on that—she had requested the time off at the last minute, and she hadn’t yet been coroner for the requisite ninety days to be guaranteed vacation time.

“I know,” Dez said, reading her face. “You must live right. It’s like you’ve got a rich daddy or something.” She chuckled as Fenway shut the door behind her. “I’m going to put these in your fridge. You want one?”

“What is that? Querido Falls Brewing?”

“Yep. Their Hefeweizen. Hope that’s okay.”

Fenway nodded. She hadn’t had their Hefeweizen, but she liked their pale ale. “But I thought you were all meeting at Winfrey’s for happy hour.”

Dez shrugged as she disappeared into the kitchen. “Bunch of sticks in the mud. After you said you weren’t coming, Mark cancelled because Randy needed help running lines for his audition. Migs and Piper got tickets to some concert down in Santa Barbara.”

“I’m glad they’re finally together.”

“Hah. Sure. If you don’t mind disgusting public displays of affection.”

Fenway heard the sound of two beers being opened and the caps swirling to a stop on the counter.

“And Rachel said she had too much work to do.”

“P.R. work seems to agree with her.”

Dez came back into the living room holding two of the beers. “You know she’s just keeping busy to keep her mind off her father’s trial.” She handed a beer to Fenway.

Fenway wanted to pour it in one of her nice beer mugs back in the kitchen—but her exhaustion won out and she stayed put. “Plus, it’s hard being a widow at twenty-four.”

“Can you name a better age?”

“Ninety-five.”

Dez tilted her head, nodded, and raised her bottle. “Cheers.”

Fenway and Dez both had a swig of their beers.

“Thanks for the beer, Dez.”

“Don’t mention it. I didn’t feel like going home and this six-pack cost about as much as a decent vodka tonic at Winfrey’s.” She had a second swig and set the beer on the coffee table. “You mind hanging out with an old lady like me on a Tuesday night?”

“Oh, please, Dez. Don’t be giving me that ‘old lady’ crap. I think *I* have more gray hair than you do.” It was true; Dez’s short black curls didn’t have a trace of gray. “And I’m exhausted. This week already feels like I’ve worked a hundred hours.”

“Oh, it’s so nice for you young’uns to make me feel spry.” Dez shook her head. “Fifty’s right around the corner.”

Fenway waved her hand. “Stop whining, Dez. You’ve got a few more years. And besides, fifty is the new thirty.”

“Spoken like someone who hasn’t seen the wrong side of thirty yet.” Dez smiled. “Okay, speaking of old ladies, my bladder seems to shrink with each passing year. Be right back. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She went into the bathroom off the hallway, closed the door, and turned on the modesty fan.

Fenway shook her head and put a coaster under Dez’s beer. Her phone rang in her purse on the kitchen table. She walked in and dug it out; the incoming caller read *Nathaniel Ferris*. She sighed and answered it.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Fenway! Glad I caught you.”

“This isn’t a great time.” She walked back into the living room and took another drink of her beer.

“It’ll just take a minute. Listen—you haven’t changed your mind about running for coroner in November, have you? You know you’re doing a hell of a job since you’ve taken over.”

“No, Dad. I’m a nurse, not a politician, and you know my boards are next month.”

Ferris sighed. “Dr. Klein is going to run.”

“I figured. He’s announcing on Monday, right?”

“That’s what I hear. News travels fast.”

“And I also heard you have some pharmaceutical executive you’re going to support.”

Dez came back into the living room, sat on the sofa, and picked up her beer.

“That’s right,” Ferris said. “Everett Michaels. But only if you’re not running, Fenway. You’re my daughter. I’m not going to promote another candidate over you.”

Fenway hit mute. “Sorry,” she whispered to Dez.

Dez nodded.

Fenway unmuted. “When I accepted the appointment,” she reminded Ferris, “it was strictly babysitting the position until November. You promised me that.”

“Okay,” he said, “I just wanted to make sure before I ask you to introduce him when he announces his candidacy.”

“Introduce Everett Michaels?”

“Right. I’d like to you introduce him—and give him your endorsement.”

“But I don’t know anything about him.”

He chuckled. “You know enough, Fenway. You know he’s the VP of development at Carpetti Pharma, you know he’s got a great medical research background, and you know he’s a lot better for the county than Barry Klein. What else do you need to know?”

“For one thing, I’ve never even met the guy.”

“We can fix that. It would really help Everett’s campaign if you would endorse him,” her father said. “Or, if you don’t want to go that far yet, you don’t have to be partisan for this—just say it’s your pleasure to introduce him.”

Fenway’s mind raced to figure out how to decline politely. “That puts me in an awkward position, Dad. I’ve still got to work with the *whole* board of supervisors until I’m replaced—and that includes Klein. And besides, won’t it look better for the press

coming from Nathaniel Ferris? You know how much half this town loves you.” *The half you own*, she thought.

“And you know better than anyone how the other half of this town hates me.” She thought she detected a note of pleading in his voice. “But many, many people like you, Fenway. The people who like me like you because you’re my daughter. And the people who *don’t* like me like you because you arrested my right-hand man for murder.”

“I think you’ve got that backwards,” Fenway said, fighting to keep the anger out of her voice. “The half that don’t like you don’t like me either. And the half that *do* like you think I’m some sort of traitor for catching Stotsky.”

“Look, if there’s one thing I know, it’s how to read a crowd. Your endorsement would be a huge boost.”

“I think my endorsement would probably hurt more than it would help.”

“Not according to our latest poll.”

“Poll?” The idea that her father already spent his own money to conduct polling on this, she realized, shouldn’t have been a surprise to her. And yet it never ceased to amaze her how Nathaniel Ferris had no clue how to behave like a normal father.

“You’ve got an eighty-one percent positive rating,” he said.

“You ran a poll? You do realize this isn’t a national election, right?”

“There are dozens of companies who do this for smaller campaigns, Fenway. It’s not a big deal. And if you introduced Everett on Monday, we’d have a sure thing in November.”

“Oh, Monday’s no good,” she said, trying to sound as disappointed as she could. “I have to drive up to Seattle this weekend, and I won’t be back.”

“Drive to Seattle? Why in the world would you do that?”

“I’m getting some of Mom’s paintings out of storage. My favorite painting of hers, in fact.”

“Which one is that?”

“The one of the ocean and the cypress tree growing out of the rock, the one right by the butterfly waystation.”

Ferris sighed audibly. “Isn’t that only a mile from your house? Don’t you jog there every morning? Can’t you see the real thing any time you want?”

Fenway gritted her teeth. “Coming from the man who fell in love with her because of a painting? That’s pretty rich, Dad.”

“I suppose,” Ferris said. He didn’t speak for a few seconds, then cleared his throat. “Can’t you just fly?”

“Nope. The paintings are too big to take on the plane.”

Her father paused. Fenway could hear him turning everything over in his head.

“You sure you won’t be back by Monday morning?”

“No, I won’t be back till at least Tuesday or Wednesday. Maybe even later.”

“Well, why don’t you take *my* plane? You’d be back in plenty of time.”

“I’m not taking your plane to Seattle, Dad.”

“Why not?”

“Because it costs you something like twenty-five grand whenever you take off and land.”

“Having you speak at Everett’s announcement is worth twenty-five thousand dollars to me, Fenway.”

She wanted to scream at him. She still had ninety-five thousand dollars in college loans to pay back, which he had never even acknowledged. He barely acknowledged that he hadn’t given Fenway or her mother a cent in alimony or child support. But he threw around a fifty-thousand-dollar weekend trip to Seattle like he could pay for it with the change he found under the sofa cushions.

“Oh, there’s the doorbell, Dad,” Fenway lied. “I’ve gotta go. Talk to you later.” And she hung up before he could protest further.

She looked at Dez, who took another drink of the Hefeweizen.
 “Nathaniel Ferris, I take it,” Dez said.

“You should be a detective.”

Dez cackled. “You may just be the only person in this county who won’t give him what he wants.”

“I may just be the only person in the county he doesn’t own,” Fenway said.

“So, you’re going to drive up and get your mom’s painting?”

“Yep. I leave Friday morning. I should get there on Saturday.”

“I’ll be interested to see the painting. You sure talked about it enough. I hope it lives up to the hype.”

“Well, if it doesn’t, take a happy pill and pretend it’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen. That’s one time I won’t need your disturbingly accurate candor.”

Dez smirked. “So where are you staying up there? Some fancy hotel?”

“I’m staying with a friend.”

“A friend?” Dez looked sideways at Fenway. “That’s suspiciously vague.”

Fenway blushed.

“Oh, girl, you’re hooking up.”

“I wouldn’t call it a *hookup*,” Fenway said. “He’s an ex-boyfriend.”

“An ex-boyfriend?” Dez narrowed her eyes. “Is this Akeel?”

Fenway’s mouth fell open. “How do you know about Akeel?”

Dez laughed. “Rachel tells me more than she should, I guess.” She lowered her voice. “Is he still hot?”

“I don’t know if I think he’s that hot.”

“Rachel said you talked about his abs and shoulders and eyes for ten minutes. I stopped paying attention, but I got enough to know you think he’s hot.”

Fenway paused. “Okay, fine. I’m going to try to hook up with him.” She lowered her voice, although no one else was in the

apartment. “Look, you know and I know that sleeping with McVie a couple months ago was a bad idea, but I, uh, I haven’t really been able to get him out of my head. But I have to work with him, and I don’t want to screw that up just because I’ve got a big schoolgirl crush on him.”

“Plus, he’s trying to make it work with his wife,” Dez said pointedly.

“Right,” Fenway agreed quickly. “So I thought maybe it would help me get over him to spend a night with Akeel.”

“Or three or four nights,” Dez said.

Fenway couldn’t help the grin that spread over her face.

“He’s that good, huh?”

“Oh, Lord, Dez, we were only together for about six weeks two years ago, but damn, we couldn’t get enough of each other. Seattle had a heat wave that summer, and we barely left his apartment. I lived with my mom and she called me a couple times to see if I was okay.” She rubbed the sides of her mouth to get herself to stop grinning, but to no avail. “Hoo boy, I was *more* than okay.”

Dez rolled her eyes and made a face. “You *know* I didn’t need that level of detail.”

“Oh, please, Dez,” Fenway said. “I didn’t go into any detail at all.”

“And yet, somehow, I still need to wash out my ears with soap.”

Fenway laughed. Dez, the one person in Estancia who didn’t expect anything from Fenway, never tried to put a claim on her. She was just there for advice and support—like how her mom had been in Seattle, before the cancer.

“But just six weeks?” Dez asked. “Did he ship out or something?”

Fenway stopped laughing. “No. It just, uh, didn’t go anywhere. We had this heat between us, but once we actually hung out together, we didn’t really click.”

“What needs to click?”

“For one thing,” Fenway said, “he didn’t have any books in his apartment.”

“None? Not even *The Da Vinci Code* or Tom Clancy or something?”

“Nope. He didn’t like reading.”

“Huh. I guess that *would* be a problem.” Dez glanced at Fenway’s overstuffed bookshelves.

“And when I met his friends,” Fenway started, and then shuddered.

“Oh,” Dez said.

“Yeah. I mean, I know Akeel and I had a physical relationship, but when I met his friends, they looked at me like—I don’t know. Some sort of trophy. One of them said Akeel only liked me because I acted like a white girl.”

“A white girl, huh.” Dez’s mouth became a thin line.

“I know. Some crack about the color of my skin, too.”

“The color of your skin?”

“I wasn’t black enough for them, apparently.”

Dez paused. “Did Akeel know your father’s white?”

“What does that matter?”

Dez shrugged. “It doesn’t really, I guess.”

“I mean, I liked the fact that Akeel was so attracted to me, but he didn’t say anything to his friends. Never defended me, just let me take it. They only said a few things, but it bugged me. We started spending a couple nights apart and then we just sort of stopped seeing each other.”

“But you called him up?”

“Um,” Fenway said, “he lives really close to the storage unit.”

“Did you call any of your other friends?”

Fenway averted her eyes.

“You better hope he’s still hot,” Dez said. “And you better hope he’s not rooming with one of those assholes who said you weren’t

black enough. Or you better start thinking of excuses why you need to sleep on the couch.”

“This is a bad idea, isn’t it?” Fenway said, biting her lip.

“You’re driving a thousand miles in your new Accord for a booty call,” Dez said. “I don’t know, I’m terrible with relationship advice. But he’s not married, and he’s hot. At least that’s something.”

PART II



SATURDAY

CHAPTER TWO



SEATTLE. SATURDAY AFTERNOON. FENWAY FLIPPED DOWN THE visor and looked at herself in the mirror. In the hotel room in Grants Pass that morning, she had spent a long time getting ready. Her hair looked fantastic in spite of the six hours in the car, still cascading in ringlets on either side of her face, almost touching her shoulders. Her eyeliner and mascara accentuated her large, dark eyes, but she hadn't overdone it. Her lipstick needed just a little touching up, but other than that, her makeup was great; not overdone, just a clean, put-together look. All the stars were lining up.

She looked one last time at what she was wearing. She had on a scarlet polo dress, with five buttons below the navy blue collar. It was contoured to her body, which she knew Akeel would like, but wasn't too forward in its sexiness. It was a little shorter than she might usually wear, but the cut of the dress was casual enough to wear sneakers with it—she wasn't in the mood to wear heels, hot ex-boyfriend or not.

She hated herself a little bit for caring this much about how she looked for Akeel. She wouldn't care this much how she looked

for McVie. McVie who read novels. McVie who liked concerts. McVie who looked in her eyes when they were talking. Not all their talk was about their work, his as sheriff, hers as coroner. But McVie had made it clear he wanted to work things out with his wife. So here she was.

She looked at the small apartment building—Akeel had one of the three upstairs apartments in the converted Victorian—and saw him at the window, watching her car, watching her.

And, she saw clearly, not wearing a shirt.

Apparently he wasn't interested in pretense.

She shook her head, popped the trunk, and opened the car door.

She took her suitcase from the trunk, keenly aware that he was watching her. When she'd walked up the seven steps to the landing, Akeel was already there, behind the door.

"Hey, babe," he said. "You changed your hair. I like it."

"Hey, Akeel," Fenway said. "Didn't your mom ever tell you you'll catch cold if you don't put on a shirt?" Cold? Hell, the danger was fever: his abs hadn't lost their definition in the two years since she had seen him. She thought of what Dez had said and breathed a sigh of relief.

"What my mamma told me was that I better have someone to keep me nice and warm." He pulled her to him. Even in her sneakers she had two inches on his five-eight frame. "I can't catch cold when you're so hot."

Fenway rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Akeel," she said, stepping out of his embrace.

"That's a great dress, too," he said. "Looks all innocent, like you're about to go on a picnic or something. It's like ninja-sexy."

"Ninja-sexy?"

"Yeah, it looks all sweet and nice at first, not like a sexy dress, and then it sneaks up on you and suddenly, pow! You don't know what hit you."

She could feel the color rise to her cheeks. "Okay, Cyrano, take this suitcase upstairs before we make everyone puke."

"Ain't no one out here but us," he said.

"I hope there's no one in *there* but us either."

Akeel smiled. Fenway smiled back and followed him upstairs.

Her hands were on his muscular back as soon as the door to his apartment closed behind them. Her left hand snaked around to his stomach, then started to loosen his belt. She kissed his shoulder.

"You're not wasting any time tonight," he said. He put the suitcase on the floor. She put her purse on the end table, still kissing his back.

"Only got one night in town," she breathed into his ear. "Wanted to make it count."

"One night?"

"We'll see how it goes."

They made it to the sofa, although his jeans did not.

It was easy to get comfortable with him again, Fenway thought. Their bodies went well together. She liked how they fit. She liked the way his skin smelled, liked how his hands were so strong and confident on her back, on her shoulders, on the sides of her face as he kissed her deeply.

Her phone rang in her purse.

When she realized where the ringing was coming from, their clothes were mostly off, and he was kissing her, up and down her body. The phone stopped ringing after about twenty seconds. Then it rang again. She ignored it again, and it again went to voicemail. They were in a rhythm, and she didn't want to lose it.

The phone rang again.

And, excruciatingly, Akeel stopped. "You got a boyfriend in Cali wondering where you are?"

"No," she said. "I hardly know anyone there except co-workers. And they know better than to call me on vacation."

"You gonna get that?"

“No, I’m not going to get that,” Fenway said. “I want you to keep doing what you were doing.”

“Your phone is breaking my concentration. And believe me, you want me to have my full powers of concentration for this.”

Fenway sighed. “Fine. I’ll tell them to go away.”

She pulled herself up on the sofa and grabbed the phone out of her purse. “It’s Dez,” she said.

“Who?”

“She’s my co-worker.” Fenway answered the call. “Hey, Dez. This better be important. You don’t have any idea what I’m—”

“Mayor Jenkins is dead, Fenway.”

Fenway stopped. “Wait, what? The mayor? Dead?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Stabbed,” Dez said. “They found her at Cactus Lake Motel about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Cactus Lake Motel? Was she trying to stop a drug deal? Was she trying to *make* a drug deal?”

“I can’t say,” Dez said. “Where are you? Have you made it to Seattle yet?”

“Yeah, I’m here. With Akeel.”

“Good. We booked you on the next flight back. Five-thirty. Coastal Airways flight out of Sea-Tac.”

“Out of Sea-Tac? But I’ve got my car here.”

“Just leave it in long-term, Fenway. The county will pick up the tab. You can go back and get your car in a few days.”

“No one else can do this?”

“Are you or are you not the coroner of this county, Fenway? You don’t think the mayor getting murdered is important enough to cut your vacation short?”

Fenway stood up and padded half-dressed into the kitchen, away from the disappointed Akeel. She lowered her voice. “Is there any way I can leave tomorrow instead?”

Dez's voice was sharp. "Did you hear me say who died? Alice Jenkins. First black judge in this county. First black mayor in this county. First black anything-that-matters in this county. Not the first black *woman*, the first black *person*, period."

"I guess I didn't know that. I'm sorry. I'll be on that flight."

"I'll see you when you land."

Dez clicked off.

Putting the phone in her purse, Fenway avoided Akeel's eyes. She had to be out of the apartment in thirty minutes. And she had caught a chill.

CHAPTER THREE



THE SECURITY LINE AT SEA-TAC WAS LONG, AND SHE REALIZED AS she sat on the airplane that she didn't even have a book to read. She just stewed about Akeel complaining about how the talk of murder had ruined the mood, wasting their remaining half hour together. And then she thought about the mayor, murdered in a motel room, and her mood grew worse.

At eight o'clock, Fenway walked out of the baggage claim area at the Estancia airport. She saw Dez waiting for her in her red Chevrolet Impala and got in.

Dez's silence spoke volumes about her dark mood as well. Fenway braced herself for a snarky comment about her too-short dress or the casual white sneakers, but it never came. Fenway had never seen her so quiet—Dez just nodded in greeting, then drove out of the airport straight to the freeway and exited onto the state highway, up into the hills toward Cactus Lake.

As dusk approached, the fog settled in, as it did around Estancia nearly every evening in the summer. They drove on the winding uphill road in silence for twenty minutes until they burst through the layer of fog.

Fenway blinked, barely believing the stark contrast between the fog and the sudden clearness, even in the twilight. She looked behind her; the grey mist obscured the town, the beach, and the ocean as far as she could see.

She turned around and out of the corner of her eye saw the sign for the turnoff for Cactus Lake. Fenway would have missed the turnoff had she been driving. Dez turned her wheel to the right and braked for the stop sign at the foot of the exit.

The pine and ironwood trees became scrubby along the side of the road, a thousand feet above sea level. Dez made a left turn onto the frontage road and pulled the Impala into the cramped parking lot of the Cactus Lake Motel. The motel sign had lost two of its letters, but their dust-ridged outlines were still visible. They pulled in next to a Dominguez County Sheriff cruiser; it had to be McVie's. He would certainly lead the investigation for a death as high-profile as this. The crime scene unit van was already on the scene. Fenway wondered if Dr. Yasuda had made the trip from San Miguelito, or if she had sent one of the techs.

Dez killed the engine and they both got out of the car and walked toward the motel office. Through the open door, she could see Sheriff McVie, tall and muscular and chiseled, looking professional in his black uniform. Fenway felt her mouth go dry. Even from this distance, she saw the gold band still around his left ring finger.

A middle-aged white man with a large pot belly stood heavily behind the counter. He looked sad and a little bit nervous.

McVie looked up when Fenway and Dez stepped through the threshold of the office.

"And this is the coroner with one of our sergeants now," McVie said.

Dez stepped up to the counter and pulled out a business card. "I'm Sergeant Desirée Roubideaux," she said to the man, who grew more pale by the second. "Did you make the 911 call?"

“Look,” the man said, “I don’t want any trouble. This place already has a bad reputation. We took your advice a couple of months ago and we’re trying to keep the junkies away.”

“We’re not gonna worry about that just now,” Dez said. “Rome wasn’t built in a day, am I right?”

The man squinted. “What?”

“I mean, I don’t think the junkies will all just leave overnight. It’s a process.”

He shrugged. “I guess so.”

“All right,” Dez said. She turned to McVie. “I understand our people are already in the room?”

He nodded. “Celeste secured the scene as soon as she arrived. CSI got here about an hour ago. I was just finishing up with Mr. Colburn here.”

“Cliburn,” the man said.

“I’m sorry. Cliburn.”

The man grabbed a key off the set of hooks behind him and handed it to the sheriff. “It’s room 26. Up that first flight of stairs to your right.”

Fenway stepped aside and let the sheriff take the lead. Grim-faced, McVie strode to the stairs and started to climb, Fenway and Dez following close behind.

“What’s the story on this?” she said to McVie as they stepped out of the office and started up the stairs.

“The 911 call came in at just after three. He said the housekeeping staff found her on the bed when they went in to get the room ready for the next guest.”

“Can we talk to the housekeeping staff?”

“They didn’t stick around,” McVie said. “Afraid of the cops.”

Fenway nodded.

She looked down the outdoor hall. Officer Celeste Salvador stood guard about halfway down between the staircase and the room.

The sheriff stopped in front of Officer Salvador, next to a tan door with brass numbers reading 26, yellow police tape across the door frame. “Thanks, Celeste,” he said to her.

Celeste cleared her throat. “Not a problem, sheriff. Hi, Dez. Hi, Fenway.”

“Who caught CSI on this one?” asked Fenway. “Did Dr. Yasuda come down herself?”

“No. The new guy caught it.”

“Kav?”

“Right. He’s still in there.”

Too bad Dr. Yasuda hadn’t made the trip, Fenway thought to herself. But Kavish Jayakody, although the newest crime scene tech, had gained Fenway’s trust by pointing out evidence in a couple of cases they had worked together.

McVie unlocked the door and pushed it slowly. It creaked as it swung. “This is kind of hard to see. You might want to prepare yourself.” He stepped backward and nodded to Dez.

“Okay,” Dez said as she lifted the tape and stepped inside, followed by Fenway, then the sheriff. McVie closed the door behind him.

On the bed lay an African-American woman of about seventy-five, dressed in a light blue business suit. She wore matching flats, but no jewelry. Her silver hair, though disheveled, looked like it had been recently done and styled. Her right arm rested at a right angle next to her body. Her left arm dangled partway off the bed, and her legs hung off, as though she had been standing, tried to sit on the bed, and collapsed. A large, wet-looking bloodstain had soaked the comforter, and several large splatters stained the carpet in the three feet or so between the front door and the bed. Fenway took a few soft steps toward the body and leaned over the bed. The woman was definitely Alice Jenkins, with the same kind brown eyes Fenway remembered from the board of supervisors’ meeting, when they discussed Fenway’s appointment as County Coroner. Alice had been an ally—or at least someone who treated

her like her own person, and not as the daughter of the most powerful man in the county. Now those kind brown eyes stared, unseeing, at the ceiling.

She tore her gaze away from Mayor Jenkins' face and down to her torso. The white blouse under her suit jacket was completely blood-soaked from just below her collar down to her waist.

An Indian man came out of the bathroom, about five-eight, with large, dark eyes, a square jaw, and slightly graying temples. He wore a black San Miguelito Medical Examiner jacket and blue nitrile gloves.

"You made it," he said.

"Hi, Kav," McVie said. "Thanks for staying."

Kav nodded. "Certainly, Sheriff." He exhaled. "As you can see, those are stab wounds on the body. I've identified four distinct wounds, two in her abdomen and two in her chest. She would have bled out quickly."

Fenway continued to look at Mayor Jenkins. "Liver temp?" Fenway asked mechanically.

"Already ambient when I got here. Rigor puts time of death around one o'clock this morning, give or take an hour or two. Salvador arrived first on the scene this afternoon."

Dez wrote quickly in her notebook. "You say you got a good look at the wounds?"

Kav nodded. "Yes. I took pictures already. Do you want to look for yourself?"

"Hang on for a second, Kav," Dez said, averting her eyes and putting her hand over her mouth. Kav waited several seconds before McVie broke the silence.

"What else did you find?"

"Not much in here," Kav said. "About three hundred fingerprints. A ton of DNA—hair, skin cells everywhere. Guests didn't choose this motel for room cleanliness. I haven't moved the body, as you can see."

“What the hell was she doing here?” Dez murmured. She shook her head, as if trying to clear her mind from a bad dream.

“I’ve been over this room thoroughly,” Kav said. “I haven’t uncovered a reason why Mayor Jenkins came here.”

Fenway thought for a moment. “Is the room in her name?”

“No,” McVie answered. “This room should have been vacant last night. The housekeeping staff did a sweep of the room this afternoon, since it had been rented for this evening.”

“Who reserved it for tonight?”

“Someone named William Matisse. There’s a note in the motel files that he prepaid for the room in cash, but doesn’t say when, or who at the motel made the transaction.”

“Well, that’s not suspicious at all,” said Dez wryly.

“Will Matisse,” McVie mused. “I know that name.” He put his hand up to his chin thoughtfully.

Dez kept writing. “It sure rings a bell,” she said. “But I can’t place it.”

“Called Yasuda yet?” Fenway asked Kav.

“I let her know,” he said. “I thought I’d wait till you got here to schedule the autopsy. I figured you’d want to attend it with the M.E.”

Fenway nodded. “Thanks, Kav.”

Dez pointed her pen at McVie. “Sheriff, we should talk to Celeste if you haven’t yet.”

McVie pressed his lips together and stepped over to the door and pulled it open.

“Officer Salvador?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you come in here a moment?”

“Yes, sir.” She stepped in through the police tape and closed the door solidly behind her. She nodded to Dez and Fenway. Kav gave her a half-smile and went back in the bathroom.

“You were the first officer at the crime scene?” asked McVie.

“Yes, sir. I received the call from dispatch at 3:23 p.m. I arrived at the motel at 3:40.”

“We didn’t have a closer patrol car to the motel?”

“Not in the afternoon, Sheriff. Things don’t usually start heating up here until the sun goes down.”

“All right. What did you do once you got here?”

“I spoke with Mr. Cliburn at the front desk.”

“That’s the man who’s there now, right?”

Celeste nodded. “I asked him if he made the 911 call. He answered affirmatively, then walked me to the room and opened the locked door with his key.”

McVie nodded.

“I asked him who found the body, and he said one of the housekeeping staff.”

“Did you get a name?”

“No, sir. Mr. Cliburn didn’t remember who reported it, and when I got here, most of the housekeeping staff had already left.”

Dez crossed her arms and shook her head.

“I asked Mr. Cliburn if anyone had been in the room except the housekeeping staff,” Officer Salvador continued. “He said he didn’t know. Many members of the staff have the key to these rooms.”

“I see,” said McVie.

Officer Salvador hesitated. “Sheriff, if I may offer an observation, security is pretty lax here. Keys go missing frequently, and I don’t believe the doors are re-keyed on a regular basis.”

“Thanks, Celeste,” McVie said. “What did you notice when you entered the room?”

She took out her notebook and flipped two pages. “First, I swept the room to make sure no one else was here. When I entered, the shades were drawn and the overhead light was off. I drew my weapon, and I turned on the overhead light with my elbow. The bathroom door was open. I also checked under the bed.”

McVie nodded.

“Then I performed a visual check on the body. I recognized Mayor Jenkins right away. The victim was clearly deceased due to her open eyes and the, uh.” She cleared her throat and blinked hard.

McVie’s voice was quiet. “Do you need a minute, Celeste?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. She cleared her throat again, then opened her eyes. “I’m fine, Sheriff. As I was saying—due to the amount of blood on the bedspread.”

“Did you check for a pulse?”

She hesitated. “Not at first, sir. I thought it was clear she was dead. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Probably a minute or so later, when I remembered protocol.”

“That’s all right, Celeste. What else?”

Salvador looked down at her notebook. “The room was quite warm, but it didn’t seem unusually so for July. The bathroom fan was on, but that was the only sound I heard.”

She flipped back a page. “I continued my sweep. I didn’t find any weapons or other hazards. I also didn’t find anything belonging to the victim in the main room, though. No purse, for example. No jewelry. No suitcase. No clothes hung up on the rod on the side there.” She motioned to a lonely-looking wooden curtain rod just outside the bathroom door.

“Anything on the bathroom counter?”

“Nothing but a wrapped soap and a plastic cup.”

“The motel provide those?”

“I assume so, but I haven’t confirmed it yet.”

“Okay.”

“I left the room, leaving the overhead light on. The door locked behind me. Then I used my radio at three forty-seven to contact dispatch.”

“Wow, you didn’t waste any time,” Fenway said to Dez. “I got the call before four.”

Dez nodded, thin-lipped. The mayor's death had sapped her usual snarky, sarcastic mood.

"Did you call Rachel too?" McVie said.

"No," said Celeste, "but I assumed that dispatch would take care of it. Either her or someone else in public relations."

"And Rachel didn't show up?" McVie asked, surprised.

"If there *is* a reporter here," said Dez, "they're probably renting a room with a hooker or a crack pipe. They're not here to get a story. Probably a good thing Rachel *didn't* show up. Keeps it out of the media another few hours."

"No reporter waiting for his big break camped on the police scanner?" asked Fenway.

"Sometimes we get lucky," McVie said.

Celeste continued. "I stood outside the door of the motel room. Mr. Jayakody arrived at, uh, let me see." She flipped another page in her notebook. "Approximately four forty-five. I didn't get the exact time of arrival."

"You were there the whole time?"

"That's right, Sheriff."

"No one went in or out?"

"Not through this door or window. And I don't see another point of entry to the room."

"Okay, thanks, Celeste," McVie said.

Kav stuck his head out of the bathroom. "I'm almost done here. The ambulance is on its way, and we'll get Mayor Jenkins transported to San Miguelito."

Fenway nodded. "I'll call Dr. Yasuda."

She stepped out of the motel room, with its harsh fluorescent light, into the dampening twilight. At almost nine o'clock, the sun had dipped behind the horizon. She drew a deep breath. The motel had accurately earned its horrible reputation. The sheriff's department constantly responded to incidents at the motel—drug busts, overdoses, prostitution. Cactus Lake itself was gor-

geous—and a misnomer, as a cactus couldn't be seen for miles, but rather pines, ironwoods, and sturdy bushes. A turnoff, five minutes down the winding road from the motel, led to a beautiful state park frequently photographed for travel magazines.

A woman in a light blue uniform down the corridor watched them with a fearful look in her eye.

Fenway thought a member of the housekeeping staff had been brave enough to stay. She smiled and waved as non-threateningly as she could. The woman jumped, startled, and disappeared around the corner.

Fenway followed. She turned the corner and the woman had unlocked a room next to a housekeeping cart.

"Hello?" Fenway called.

The woman wouldn't make eye contact.

Fenway tried again. "*¿Cómo está, señora?*" Bits of high school Spanish trickled back into her head. She had read Borges in the original Spanish her senior year, but she had forgotten so much that she doubted she could get a conversation going with this woman, much less ask her what she saw.

"*No quiero ningún problema,*" the woman said. Fenway had to translate in her head—the woman didn't want trouble.

"*No hay problema aquí,*" Fenway said. There's no trouble here.

The woman looked up and finally met her eyes.

Fenway struggled with the next sentence. "*¿Está usted trabajar aquí el sábado por la noche?*" She knew she had butchered the verb tense, but hoped the woman would answer whether or not she had worked Saturday night.

"*¿Anoche?*"

Fenway grimaced. "*Sí, anoche.*"

"*Sí, cuando la alcaldesa fue asesinada.*"

Alcadesa, alcaldesa—Fenway dug through the files in her brain for the translation. What was it?

"*Señora Jenkins,*" the woman said.

It clicked into place—*alcadesa* meant a female mayor. The housekeeper had been working the previous night, the night of the murder.

“*¿Has visto algo?*” Fenway asked, hoping the housekeeper had seen something else.

The woman stepped out of the room and took a long look down either side, and answered in broken English.

“I see something,” she said. “A man. He look strong. All black clothes.”

“He wore all black?”

“*Sí.*”

“Like a suit?”

The woman looked at her strangely.

Fenway fought to remember the word, then got it. “*¿Un traje? ¿Un traje de negocios?*”

She shook her head. “Not, how do you say, fancy. Clothes for the running.”

“A running outfit?”

“*Sí.*”

“Long sleeves and long pants?” Fenway mimed this.

She nodded.

“Where did you see the man in the running outfit?”

“At the room.”

“With Señora Jenkins?”

“No. Um, how do you say. Outside. Outside the room.”

“Did you see any blood? *¿Hay sangre?*”

“On the running clothes? No, I don’t know. He had all black clothes.”

“Can you describe the man?”

The woman shook her head. “He was no white,” she said. “But I no see his face.”

Fenway asked two or three additional questions, thinking more and more that she’d be embarrassed if her old Span-

ish teacher Señora Francisco showed up. But the woman had no more information. Fenway thought about asking her name, but decided against it; she didn't want to scare her off. Fenway thanked her and let her get back to cleaning.

She hadn't known Alice Jenkins very long, but the few interactions they had had were good. Not only had Mayor Jenkins deflected several attacks from Dr. Barry Klein when they had first met, but she also gave Fenway a special commendation for solving the previous coroner's murder. In Dominguez County, Jenkins was popular with the university liberals because of her stance on inclusivity, and accepted by the rural conservatives because she championed farm assistance and additional resources to fight wildfires.

A few weeks ago, Celeste had joined Fenway for lunch at Dos Milagros, Rachel's favorite *taquería* on Third Street. They had run into Mayor Jenkins leaving as they were arriving. "Afternoon, Celeste!" the mayor had said, beaming at her as she got in her car. "Good to see you too, Fenway."

Over their tacos, Fenway asked how long Celeste had known the mayor.

"Since the first day I got to town," Celeste had said. "She got me through my initial interview. The sheriff before McVie didn't really like, uh, people of color. He kept calling me Mexican."

Fenway had nodded through her own mouthful of *pollo asado*. She knew the feeling.

"The mayor is one of the good ones," Celeste had said. "And she talks to people about her ideas in a way that the people who originally disagree end up thinking it's *their* idea."

"My mom was like that too," Fenway said. "I bet the two of them would have totally gotten along."

And now both of those strong, outspoken African-American women were gone. Fenway came back to the present, shook her head, and walked toward Dez's Impala.

She took her phone out of her purse and called the medical examiner's office. Dr. Yasuda picked up. She, too, seemed uncharacteristically distraught by the news of Mayor Jenkins' death. They agreed to meet for the autopsy the next morning.

This hadn't been a good day, and it didn't seem like it would get any better. Fenway looked up and saw the ambulance from San Miguelito turn off the mountain highway. The body of Mayor Jenkins would soon disappear from the motel room.

BY PAUL AUSTIN ARDOIN



FENWAY STEVENSON MYSTERIES

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The Reluctant Coroner

The Incumbent Coroner

The Candidate Coroner

The Upstaged Coroner (coming soon)



Bad Weather