

UNDETECTED

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Jeffrey Marshall

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She could almost smell the inside of the motel before she went in. With its whitewash fading and the vacancy sign missing an “n”, it would have the scent of cheap disinfectant and perhaps a slight mustiness. Suzy remembered that smell, but it had been years since she’d experienced it. She never thought she’d have to revisit it, but things were desperate now, she was on the run, and she had no choice. Enjoying the comforts of an upscale motel was out of the question.

She had left Rye in mid-morning, steering the Mercedes west across the car-choked George Washington Bridge and into New Jersey. Passing the shimmering high-rise apartment towers in Fort Lee, she’d stopped in Parsippany to rent a car, leaving the Mercedes skewed at an ungainly angle against the chain-link fence in the back of the lot. Her rented Ford Focus, she knew, would be far less conspicuous – but she realized unhappily that having to rent the car with a credit card would link her to it.

From here on, she would be paying only in cash. She’d made two large withdrawals from the bank’s ATM, gathering enough, she thought, that would easily get her to Little Rock and have plenty on hand to keep going, wherever her flight would take her.

Approaching Nashville, Suzy eased off I-40 just after the airport and headed north to the old Lebanon Pike, which meandered like a lazy gray river west into the city. She knew it just well enough from a previous trip to sense it was what she was looking for: an old commercial strip, peeling at the edges, graced – well, that wasn’t exactly the word – with warehouses, storage rental units and motels that had long ago ceded any claim to prominence to the chain properties huddled just off the interstate.

The motel clerk, a thin young man with close-cropped hair, a scraggly brown goatee and ear piercings, looked up with a crooked smile. Suzy didn’t know it, but the motel, in business for 62 years, had a local reputation as a spot for traveling salesmen on a budget and for daytime trysts for surreptitious lovers.

“Is this just for tonight?” he asked.

“Yes, just tonight.” She seemed a bit uneasy, looking about, but calm.

“That’ll be fifty-four dollars and forty-five cents, including tax.”

“Fine.” She reached into her wallet and brought out three twenties. As she’d suspected, she didn’t need to fill out any form or write down the make and license plate of her car.

He reached into the till, hidden from her view, and gave her change and handed her a key card. “Room 221 – it’s on the second floor. Just go down to your right a little ways and you’ll see the stairs going up

there.” He seems sharp enough, she thought to herself, but I certainly don’t care for the look; maybe he’s an aspiring country artist, like so many in Nashville, and this is his idea of hip.

“Thank you.” She didn’t seem interested in making small talk, and so he simply smiled. She turned on her heels and walked toward the door, and he noticed that she limped perceptibly.

The room was only marginally better than Suzy had feared. It had a tired patina of the 70s, with dark brown curtains, a dark orange spread on the queen bed, and a window air conditioner, listing slightly, that seemed to be on its last legs. At least the room seemed clean. She set the suitcase on the bed, sat down beside it and sighed, and then her brain started working, plotting out the next day.

She glanced to her left and took in the upholstered chair. What struck her wasn’t the shape, which was utterly conventional, or even the condition – a sagging cushion and a slight rip in the seat – as much as the color, a deep burgundy.

It was the color of the tie Avery had been buried in – a favorite that his children had insisted on. Suzy had wanted him cremated: dust to dust. But a stipulation in his will she had been unaware of required a burial, and it was in a fine mahogany box, burnished to a rich sheen, with a creamy velvet interior and with gleaming brass handles. She’d lifted her eyebrows in surprise when she saw the price, but she paid it; some might have said it was the least Suzy could have done for a man who gave her 20 very fine years before she decided to kill him.

She pulled her phone from her purse and saw that there were several missed calls and a message from Dean – no surprise there. He would be shocked and concerned that she’d taken the car and left without a word. She went to her email and composed a new message for Sally – she needed to let her know she was on her way. Little Rock, here I come, she thought a bit dispiritedly. Diving into the proverbial arms of her best friend, who would have no idea what she was getting into.