



THE

CUTAWAY

A THRILLER

CHRISTINA KOVAC

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and *You Will Know Me***

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a novel

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THE CUTAWAY

CHAPTER ONE

IT BEGAN WITH someone else's story. In the beginning, a woman went out to meet a man, and on her long walk, she disappeared. I didn't know the woman. I'd never met her. But I could see her clearly in my mind, walking the streets of Georgetown, her heels striking the sidewalk to the percussive music booming out of city bars. That same path I'd traveled many times myself.

Her married name was Evelyn Carney. She'd been born a Sutton, small-town country club people hailing from the cold north. I didn't discover much about her people, except they seemed to have no time for her or to care very much about what she did, and when she disappeared, gave a collective shrug. Had she fled them, or was she like so many other young women, women like me, who'd come to DC with dreams of making herself anew? She had none of the typical means to success in the District, no powerful sponsor or academic prowess or massive wealth. She had no family connections, either. But she had ambition and a powerful appeal to men, and she wasn't afraid to use either.

I never figured out how that captured my sympathy, but somehow I got hooked by that first glimpse of her. My mind is devilishly quick to fasten itself to an image, and I should've been more careful. I'd certainly been warned. When I was a young and reverent girl making those gestures that good girls must make, my parish priest had told me: "Be careful what your eyes take in. What you see becomes a part of you."

It might have been advice worth heeding, but I didn't, not when I was a child or a cub reporter, or much later, a too-young executive producer playing with the power of pictures. By then, I was hip deep in my quest for Evelyn Carney, and it was too late.

On an early Wednesday morning, her story arrived in a stack of press releases left on my desk. I'd been flipping through the papers when the big, bold letters—MISSING—caught my attention, and then the text:

The Metropolitan Police Department is seeking the public's assistance in locating a missing person identified as Evelyn Marie Carney. She was last seen at approximately 9:48 p.m., on Sunday, March 8, in the twelve hundred block of Wisconsin Avenue, NW.

The MPD lingo description—thirty-year-old white female, five four, 115 pounds—could have fit any woman. It almost fit me.

Maybe thirty seconds of airtime, no more, but then I thought: Georgetown? No one went missing from Georgetown. Not with police officers standing sentinel every couple of blocks, protecting the expensive houses and trendy restaurants and upscale shops.

Beneath the text was the missing woman's photograph, blurred by a bad copy job. Her face was grainy and gray with two white spots for eyes—like a mask, creepy as hell—and I thought she was probably dead. It happened with sickening frequency: a woman killed by someone said to have loved her, or less often, by a stranger preying on her. Throughout the decade I'd been in the District, I'd worked different variations of this same story with sickening frequency.

There was a tap on my office door as Isaiah came in. He was the managing editor, my right-hand man, and he knew everything—changing technology in broadcasting, history of the city, local politics and crime stats, who's who, and what's what. Nearly forty years ago, he was one of the first black journalists to break into television. He was a great newsman.

"You're late for your own meeting," he said, looking at me over the top of his black horn-rims. "What happened to your Virginia Knightly early-for-everything rule?"

It was a rule he'd taught me, along with everything I knew about reporting. I glanced at my watch and was surprised to see he was right. "Let's go," I said.

As we cut through the newsroom, I got that rush of joy that comes at the oddest times—in the quiet moments before an editorial meeting, in the midst of my shows if there was a beautiful shot of video. Sometimes it came at the end of the day after everyone had gone home and only I was left to turn out the lights.

In the conference room, Nelson Yang, our best young photographer, stood with his shoulders pressed against the glass wall and his Dodgers cap pulled low, covering his mop of dark hair. He had a careless disposition and a penchant for gossip. Now he was telling a lewd tale of a competing news director caught with a female employee on the floor of the Graphics Department. “Talk about graphic,” he muttered.

“No news director would risk his job in such a way,” Isaiah said, taking his seat next to me.

I lifted my hand, ever the traffic cop. “True or not, it’s unprofessional to talk about our colleagues’ personal lives.”

“But, Virginia,” Nelson whined, “it’s what we do.”

Moira swept into the meeting. *Swept* is the only way to describe how Moira moved. She was built like a runway model, and her loose bohemian clothes trailed behind her as if she were caught in a constant headwind. She was the perfect female anchor, defying demographics of gender and age and race. She had the androgynous beauty of a Greek statue and the warm toast-colored skin of newly baked bread.

“They’re laying off people at Channel 5,” she said in her perfectly articulated voice.

“Coming soon to a theater near you,” Isaiah said.

Here we go again. Every week there was some new anecdote about the demise of broadcast television. Now it’s true that awhile back when the sponsors were losing money and pulling their ads, I panicked a little. Our fate was tied with theirs. But you didn’t cry disaster in the face of disaster. You put on your game face and dug in harder.

“They’re offering early retirement,” I said. “Not layoffs.”

“Same thing,” Moira shrugged one of her shoulders, as if she didn’t care enough to exert both. “The experienced people lose their jobs.”

“Not nearly the same,” I argued. “Early retirement comes with a big, fat paycheck that no one would take if they didn’t want to.”

“I’d love to get money for nothing,” Nelson said, and then he leaned across the table toward me. “What are you huddled over?”

“It’s called a press release. Maybe you’ve heard of them.”

“A press release of what? A Rorschach test?”

I studied the eerie eyes of Evelyn Carney again. “It’s supposed to be a picture of a woman missing from Georgetown.”

“It’s the picture that’s missing,” Nelson said with disdain. “That ink stain could be anybody. You, Moira, anybody.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah,” I said, and then to Isaiah, “Get the police to email a color photo, will you?”

When he opened the glass door to go, I asked Isaiah to find Ben. “Ask him to call his cop buddies. See what they think of the case.”

He gestured to the digital clock above the bank of televisions, meaning Ben was late, as usual. “I’ll try to find him, but you know how it is with the beautiful people,” Isaiah said. “No offense, Moira.”

She did her one-shoulder shrug.

Later, when the evening news was under way, I left the control room and climbed the stairs to my office, where I turned off the overhead lights. The soft yellow desk lamp threw shadows over shelves holding my mother’s antique tea set and my books, waiting like old friends. There were shadows, too, on the awards hung on the walls—some from stories with Ben, some all my own—and on the framed articles I wrote during my early days at the *Washington Post*.

I kicked off my shoes, and lifting the remotes from my desk, turned on the monitors showing newscasts from each competing station, leaving them on mute. At the end of the hour, the color photograph of the missing woman flashed across the row of monitors simultaneously.

Evelyn Carney was young and pretty, with shoulder-length brown hair, thick and wavy, wilder than my own. Her skin was rosier, too, and her face rounder, and her green eyes tilted up in the corners like a Disney princess.

I’d seen her before, but not in person. She’d been in a video, although I couldn’t place the clip. It’d been brief, maybe two seconds long, three at

most. Probably a cutaway shot, one of those quick flashes of video used to show a reaction, but I couldn't be certain.

I went to my desk and clicked on the database for archived video on my computer and ran a search for Evelyn Carney. Her name brought up no hits. I was expanding the search when Ben knocked on my door.

He must've come directly from the anchor desk. His face was still covered in makeup, and his dark hair had that perfect gelatinous sheen he'd mess up as soon as he hit the street. He was giving me that look of his, his smile slow and dark eyes direct, as if I were the only woman in the world. I was pretty sure he looked at all women that way.

"I'm in the mood for some Russian lit," he said, and I waved him in. He bent his big body to the bookshelf, pulling out the hardbound copies of *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* and grabbing the bottle of vodka they hid. He poured a hefty shot into the teacup from my mother's set. His hand eclipsed the cup as he swirled it. "I always wondered what you kept behind your *Ulysses*."

"Stay away from my Irish," I said. "The alcohol isn't a good idea anyway."

He lifted his cup. "To all the bad ideas that make life worth living," he said and tossed back the shot, a momentary grimace on his handsome face.

I rotated the monitor with its picture of Evelyn to face him. "Where have we seen her before?"

One eyebrow shot up. "We have?"

"On video," I said. "Somewhere."

He dragged a chair stuttering across the carpet, flipped it backward, and sat with his elbows on my desk. He angled the monitor for better viewing.

My nails drummed across the top of the desk.

"Shhh," he said without looking away from the monitor, pressing the tips of his fingers against mine, stilling them. He had thick-veined, red-knuckled hands marred by a half-moon scar; strong, capable hands. When I pulled mine away, a corner of his mouth lifted. He continued to study the photo.

Finally, he said, "I've never seen this woman in my life."

“And you’d remember because she’s beautiful.” I’d meant to tease him, but it came out like a complaint.

He looked up. “But you remember?”

“I’ve seen her in a short clip. I can’t place it.”

“What goes on in there?” he said, tapping his forehead. “How does that work?”

As I concentrated, my eyes grew heavy, and the memory isolated, sharpened: “It’s two seconds of video. A crowd-reaction shot to a main story that I can’t see. She’s clear, though, dead center in an audience of some sort, seated. The rest of the room, or any identifying feature, is beyond the frame.”

My forehead scrunched up. “But the woman, this Evelyn Carney—she’s got the photographer’s attention. It’s the way she leans forward, some intense emotion . . .” My voice drifted off.

“You can’t read the emotion?” he asked softly. “Or you can’t see it clearly?”

“I don’t understand it. Whatever it is, she’s alone in it. No one around her acts as she does.” I blew out a breath of frustration. “All I got.”

He eased back in the chair. “You think she’s going to be a big story?”

“Not sure. I need more information.”

“That’s why you had Isaiah hunt me down, nagging me to make calls.”

“Isaiah asked you to do your job. You used to love reporting.” I paused. “That was before the anchor desk ruined you.”

He laughed. “Poke at me all you please. I know about your soft underbelly. Besides, men like mean women. Mean or crazy, not both at the same time. Not even I could handle that.”

“Not true.”

“You’re right. I probably could handle that.”

“About what men like, I mean.”

“Truest thing I can tell you, Virginia.”

I lifted my hands impatiently. “Did you get information on Evelyn Carney or not?” If I let him, he’d draw the whole damn thing out all night. He had to be the slowest newsman I’d ever met.

He had discovered that Evelyn was a recent law school graduate.

She worked at a prestigious firm. On the night she disappeared, she had dinner at a restaurant in Georgetown. His source didn't know the name of her dinner date, but she left alone. Police recovered her car, abandoned not fifty yards from the restaurant. I asked if we could get a shot of the car.

"It's in the garage at Mobile Crime," he said.

"So investigators think something bad happened. What does your guy think?"

"My guy always thinks something bad happened. He says the chief took the case out of the district today. She assigned it to detectives up at CID."

Criminal Investigations wouldn't normally handle a missing persons case so soon, not unless there were special circumstances. I wondered what those might be.

"How about we grab some dinner?" Ben said.

I gazed up, still lost in my what-ifs about Evelyn Carney.

"Someplace quiet," he went on. "You could expense it, we both get a free meal, and we could talk. We need to talk."

"About the case?"

He stretched his shoulders, pushing outward, as if fighting some terrible constriction, before he hefted himself from the chair and made his way to the door.

I waved helplessly at the spread of papers over my desk. "It's only that, you know, there's so much—"

"Work, yeah, I know."

After Ben left, I searched again for that video of Evelyn. It was maddening. I began to question what I'd remembered. Maybe the video hadn't even been on our news. Maybe it was video from a competing station. That was especially worrisome.

By the time I looked up from the computer, bleary-eyed, it was late. So I sorted my work into piles of what I'd done and what I'd yet to do and made a note about assigning someone to resume the video search tomorrow, knowing in the end, that someone would probably be me.

It was a five-minute drive to my neighborhood in Cleveland Park. I parked a half block from my house, the closest spot I could find. The

night was cool and clear and the street was cast in blue. A full moon was over the National Cathedral tower.

From beneath the seat of my car, I pulled out my three-cell flashlight, heavy with a patterned grip that felt good in my hand. It was the kind beat cops carried not for illumination but as yet another weapon, the same reason I carried it up the brick walkway and onto my porch. I went inside and locked the door. The click of the security bolt echoed through my empty house.