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The Cutaway

Written by Christina Kovac

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THE CUTAWAY

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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.

CHAPTER TWO

MY MEMORY ISN'T exactly photographic. For instance, my mind doesn't collect reams of newsprint or prose, and numbers are a completely foreign language. Only pictures burn a permanent place in my memory, a terrific gift at deadline. I can remember the angle of every frame I've used, where it was shot, what time of year, if there were leaves on the trees or snow on the ground, tourists mingling in the foreground, that sort of thing. But here's the flip side of that shiny coin: you can't get *rid* of a picture, either. Not even when it hurts you.

That's how I got into trouble about five years back. During what would become my final stint as an on-air reporter, I'd been working the story of a mother and daughter gone missing from a DC suburb. Turns out, the husband had refused to pay back a debt to some really bad guys. I don't remember all those details. Only what happened to the mother and her girl. The police requested help from the FBI, and one of the agents assigned was a guy I often used as a source, so I pretty much owned the story. But soon the story owned me, too: long days and sleepless nights, the meals I went without—nothing mattered except finding that mother and her daughter.

One morning, my source tipped me to a search in a remote park north of the city. It was large and densely wooded and leaves covered tangled paths that merged into one another. In my hurry, I got lost. When I found the crime scene tape, I was no longer certain which side I was on, so I followed the tape until I heard the growl of an engine.

About a dozen searchers circled a crane, which was lowering a steel drum to the sand. The drum was wet with pond water. One of the searchers struggled with a crowbar to break the seal. Finally, there was a loud crunch as the drum opened and a thud as the heavy lid fell on the

sand. The crane operator cut the engine, and everything went silent as the searchers clustered.

I moved closer. The top of a woman's head was visible, the white line of her scalp glowed against shiny black hair. Her body was curled inside, chin tucked to one shoulder and arms held outward, protectively it seemed. And then I saw what—or rather *whom*—she'd been trying to protect.

A child cradled in her arms.

It came to me at once: the last moments inside that drum, the mother trying to soothe her little girl, both trapped inside that black, cramped, airless space with the water sloshing outside. And then I heard another thing, too. It was soft as the breeze through the tops of the trees, an echo of a woman's whisper: *It's okay. Mama loves you. Someone will come for us.*

And no one had come.

Well, I couldn't do that live shot. I couldn't even lift myself from the path. My limbs felt heavy, waterlogged, and my heart thumped in my ears, competing with the *huh-huh-huh* of my choppy breath. When someone tried to help me up, I had to sit back down again. That's really all I remember.

Isaiah covered for me. He sent the new guy at the station, a reporter named Ben Pearce, to take over my story. When the live shot was over, Ben drove me back to the station, where Isaiah lectured me on my *susceptibility to certain stories,* on letting myself *get all run down. You don't take care of yourself,* he'd said. *You can't do field work if you don't take care of yourself, simple as that.*

That story marked my fall from the highest of highs, and yet I learned to love producing. For me, it has always been about telling stories, no matter where you do it—in front of the camera or behind it—and it's the best gig going. You hold on to it for as long as you can, knowing that one morning you can wake up at the pinnacle, and by nightfall, you're clinging to your career by your fingertips. In a snap, just like that.

———

The next morning, I cut across the cathedral grounds on my walk to work. At Wisconsin Avenue, someone had taped Evelyn's missing

persons poster onto a bus-stop enclosure. The edges of the poster were already curled in the cool, moist air. Another poster hung in the window of my favorite coffee shop. I opened its door, assaulted by the strong coffee smell. You could get a buzz just standing there.

The barista, Alonzo, was a tall guy with dreadlocks. I'd been coming to his coffee shop for years. When he greeted me from behind the espresso machine, I ordered my usual—a black coffee, the biggest cup they had.

"That poster in the window," I said. "Do you know her? Evelyn Carney?"

"Yeah, actually, I do. She's a customer." He talked as he worked the espresso machine. The line behind me began to swell. "Her friend handed out posters yesterday and asked us to hang one up. I said, sure, I'm happy to help."

"So Evelyn lives in the neighborhood?"

"Probably works in an office around here," he said. "She and her friend come in for a coffee from time to time, always with a stack of files they're going through. They're all about the work. Her friend *Paige*"—intoning her name so you could tell what he was thinking—"she can wear a suit, believe me."

I laughed. "You got a number for your Paige?"

"She gave me her business card. Give me a minute to clear the line. I'll get it for you."

I moved over to the bar and sat, my heel resting on the rung of the stool, and warmed my hands on the cup. The coffee was deliciously hot and bitter as always. A well-thumbed *City Paper* was spread across the bar. I flipped through it while waiting for Alonzo's break. Finally it came. He strutted out of the back room, waving a little card.

"You don't think something bad happened to her?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'd like to find out."

He hesitated, saying, "Paige didn't say I could give her number out. But you'd be helping, right? Put her picture on the news, do a story or something, then she comes home?"

"That's the idea."

I copied the phone number onto my notepad, double-checking the spelling of the law firm, then handed the card back.

"You get the story and find the girl, be sure to make me the hero," he said, smiling. "Paige gives me her digits, and I get my just desserts."

———

Our newsroom and studios were housed on the top floors of a square building erected during the ugly era of American architecture. It sat atop the highest point in Washington, a hill shared by other news stations to the south of us.

A delivery cart blocked the building entrance. Some boxes had fallen from the cart and into the automatic door, jamming it. The delivery guy was struggling and people behind him complaining, but no one stepped forward to help the guy. I didn't, either, distracted as I was by my expanding list of priorities for the morning: the video search for Evelyn, follow-up calls to police for the latest in the investigation, and now this contact number for Evelyn's friend Paige Linden. I'd assign my best reporter, Alexa Lopez, to call her. Alexa had a softness that disguised her tenacity and a wonderful way of making people talk.

Once the deliveryman cleared out, the guard waved me through, saying, "Good morning, Ms. Knightly." His attention went to someone behind me.

A woman stood in the entrance. She wore boots the way a cat arches its back, her face was something you'd see touched up in a magazine—big eyes, small nose, cheeks curved like a Ming vase—and her blond hair swung in the light. She had TV written all over her.

The elevator doors opened, and inside, Isaiah stood slack-jawed. I got in and pushed the button. "You might want to close your mouth before the drool runs out," I joked.

He looked at me over his horn-rims. "Do they get younger every year? It's a terrible thing to grow old in a young person's business."

"You are *not* old. You are experienced, respected, and skilled. You are necessary."

He gave me a gentle smile. "Your affection blinds you."

The elevator arrived at our floor. We stepped into the cold air made for machines, not men. Across the newsroom, Alexa Lopez was rapid-fire cursing in a way that sounded like beautiful Spanish poetry, if you

didn't know what she was saying. I didn't *habla,* but in a Washington newsroom, you picked up gutter words in many different languages. I moved quickly for damage control. Alexa was waving a camera media card beneath Nelson's chin. "He shot me fat," she said.

Nelson leaned into her, his mop of black hair falling over unshaven cheeks. His checkered scarf wafted against her. It looked like the beginning of an embrace except for those two sharp chins pointing at each other and the card she used to slash at the scarf.

"I shot her," he said, "She's—"

"Don't you say it." Her face was flushed, her dark eyes wild.

"I was going to say—"

"*Don't even think it,*" she said, and then to me: "This is how he gets back at me."

"I'm an artist," he sneered. "Not a plastic surgeon."

"*Chinga tu madre.*" We all understood that one. The newsroom went silent, except for the chirping police scanners and ringing phones, which no one answered.

"No arguing in the newsroom," I said, trying to push Alexa along. She wouldn't budge. I said, "Show me your stand-up in my office. I'm sure you look great. If you need a retake, we'll get someone to do that, but it has to be fast. I have a more important story for you."

"It's killing him," she said. "He still hasn't gotten over me."

Great red splotches colored Nelson's cheeks. "Gotten over you? You dumped me *last night*."

They were shouting now. My efforts to come between them had failed miserably. Several writers lifted their heads from their desks, and there was a grin or two but no help. At the far side of the newsroom, Ben came out of the elevator, pushing his mountain bike. I walked as quickly as I could without appearing to run to him.

"Alexa and Nelson are fighting," I said. "Get your buddy out of here before I haul them both up to personnel."

"No kidding." He pulled off his helmet and ran his fingers through his hair. "Look at this newsroom. They look like prairie dogs poking their heads out of the ground." He pushed his bike leisurely past the cubicles. "On Sundays my grandma used to get all gussied up in her

church hat and grab her favorite rifle and go prairie dog hunting. Hell of a shot, my grandma. Too bad we had to take away her gun."

We crossed the newsroom. Ben leaned his bike against his hip as he pulled off his gloves. "You guys fighting?" he asked Alexa.

"He's trying to kill my career."

"No one can kill your career," he told her. "You're a great reporter."

She gave Ben a disbelieving look. "Don't let him shoot you. He'd turn you into a hunchback. The great Emmy Award–winning Nelson Yang who shoots women—"

"Lower your voice," I warned her.

"—and turns them into pigs."

Nelson gasped. "She thinks she can wear white," he told Ben. "How can she not know it makes her wide as a billboard?"

Ben whispered into Alexa's ear. She blinked up at him from beneath thick lashes and sucked in her cheeks, biting the folds. It was a wicked, knowing look that had Nelson kneading his scarf. She walked away with a pronounced swivel in her hips.

"*Nelson,*" I said in warning.

He ignored me.

"Nelson," I repeated. "Let her go."

He chased after her.

"It'll blow over now," Ben said. He pointed across the room where Nelson had caught up with Alexa. Soon they were huddled in a corner.

As we strolled down the corridor toward my office, I told Ben about the phone number in my notepad, how I'd planned to assign the story to Alexa and Nelson.

"You could ask me to report," he said. "I'm still pretty good in the field."

"Try not to be absurd. You're the anchor now." A superanchor, if truth be told, as damn near celebrity as you could get in Washington, and it embarrassed the hell out of him.

"I'd take a field assignment if you ask nicely," he teased. "You could produce for me, like back in the day. Write all the boring stuff I'm no good at writing."

"You mean, like your script? Do your work?"

"Why not?" He grinned. "But I'd need you in the field with me, not stuck here. I may not be the deepest-thinking man on the planet, but even I understand you shouldn't hole yourself up here day and night."

"I can't go out in the field," I said in a cool voice. And I couldn't. There was too much to do here at the station.

"Lost your nerve, didja?"

"My—*nerve?*"

"Settle down now. It happens." He gave me his Anchor Ben look, his smile wry and dark eyes crinkled in the corners. "You used to be great in the field, but that was years ago, and now you're not so sure of yourself. You're afraid you're rusty."

"I am not—" And then I stopped. Hell, I probably would be rusty, now that I thought about it.

"We can shake off the rust together. All I'm saying."

"I have responsibilities to the shows," I said, hesitating. "And there's the video of Evelyn I have to find."

"Isaiah can cover the shows. He's more than capable. Assign the video search to a couple of editors. Let them do what they do best." His voice went low and slightly mocking, but of whom I wasn't sure. "Come out and play. We can bust the story wide open. You know you want to."

The idea was tantalizing.

I thought about the press release of Evelyn with those strange white spots for eyes, Evelyn who might need someone to help her, and this feeling crept up on me, catching me by surprise. It made no sense, and yet I couldn't shake it. It was the loneliest damn feeling.