

Free Prologue

THE VANISHING GIRLS



CALLIE
BROWNING

The Vanishing Girls

Prologue

Callie Browning

Follow Callie Browning @BajanCallie on:

Instagram

Twitter

Facebook



Scan to unlock the latest information on releases and behind-the-scenes details.

Copyright

The Vanishing Girls

Copyright 2021 © by Callie Browning

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this book. No part of this text may be reproduced, decompiled, transmitted, downloaded, reverse-engineered or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express permission of the author, her estate or duly appointed agents.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the author.

FIRST EDITION

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, and some events is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-976-8306-02-9

Eileen

That Night

Of all the bad ideas Eileen had ever had, this was the only one that made her skin crawl. She had resisted for a long time, telling herself that something would turn up. Eventually, Eileen had to face the reality that the bills — and her desperation — were multiplying at the same rate.

Chills coursed down her back as she stood on the darkened street corner and looked around. In an alcove just twenty feet away, women were in two parked cars, the windows tinted with heavy fog as the occupants engaged in the world's oldest profession. Even from where she stood, Eileen could hear the creaking as the cars' chassis groaned in protest over the empty whistle of wind that barreled through the narrow city street. Everything — the wind, the sounds, the sight of pot-bellied men driving away with young women — made her stomach curl.

Eileen bit her lip. It was her first night on the street. There weren't many places she knew of where women could put a price on their bodies, but she'd chosen Buckworth Street because it was a small business district that wasn't frequented by seedy crowds. By her logic, discreet businessmen would be more likely to frequent the area. Which meant that even if the customers did see her again, they'd keep their mouths shut. Eileen didn't imagine that she'd keep her dignity in one piece, but spending a few nights on the streets was preferable to *living* on the street.

Out of the corner of her eye, both cars drove out, their lights off until they turned the corner and three women emerged. Eileen furrowed her brow; two customers and three women? She shuddered and pulled her acid-washed jeans jacket closer around her body. She didn't want to know how that math worked out.

“Wait, you see this fresh meat here covering up the goods?” crowed a short thick woman in emerald green tights.

“Juicy Fruit, she must think the men gonna buy a pig in a bag,” crowed a tall, long-breasted woman in a shiny blue dress. She reached out and yanked open the coat, exposing Eileen's short skirt and tight top.

The women laughed as they surrounded Eileen, their beady eyes roving over her body with interest. Eileen's face reddened.

“We ain't see you out here before,” said Juicy Fruit as she fingered the edge of Eileen's coat.

Eileen straightened her back and gritted her teeth. “Yeah. Things are a little hard. I'm doing this for a few weeks until something else comes up.” Eileen raised her chin and took a deep breath, trying her best to stay calm.

The women cackled like a band of witches, slapping their thighs as tears ran down their faces. Eileen narrowed her eyes. “What's so funny?”

“Phew, child,” exclaimed the tall one, as she wiped her cheeks. “You think being on these streets was a childhood dream? All three of we said ‘just a few weeks’.”

The short slim one grinned as she lit a cigarette. “I was here for ten years,” she said as she puffed a hazy cloud of nicotine into Eileen's face.

“That’s all very well and good for you ladies, but I won’t be here past the end of the month.”

“Then what?” jeered Juicy Fruit. “Then you’ll start giving the landlord a little something to avoid paying rent? Find a married man who wants a li’l sex in exchange for grocery money?” She looked Eileen up and down, the sneer on her face growing more pronounced in the yellow glare of the streetlights. “I got news for you, bitch: picking fares is picking fares whether you do it fast or in slow motion.”

Eileen’s jaw clenched as she glowered at the woman. It was one thing to be there in the first place; it was another to tolerate their crap.

Eileen smiled sweetly at them. “You’re right. I think I’ll go and find my own corner; clearly, this one is reserved for card-carrying members such as yourself.”

Juicy Fruit frowned and the others were taken aback as Eileen turned and walked off. Her high heels clicked a steady beat on the sidewalk as she made her way past a bakery until she found another spot in front of a furniture store. This corner wasn’t as obscure as the other, but what it lacked in privacy, it made up for with more traffic.

Eileen huddled in the shadow of the streetlight's pole, watching the handful of cars that drove past. A few minutes later, a black car slowed to a stop in front of her. To her surprise, when the driver lowered the window, he was face-to-face with her. She peered into the car, checking to see if there were two occupants. She hadn't banked on being shared like a platter the way how Juicy Fruit and the others had been. He noticed her startled face and grinned. “Left-hand drive,” he explained as he gestured to the steering wheel in front of him. He was dark-skinned and very handsome with nice teeth that

were just as white as the crisp shirt he wore. His face broke out in an appreciative grin as he looked her up and down before he casually asked, "Usual price?"

Eileen nodded. She hoped he wasn't astute enough to figure out that she didn't know what the usual price was. He unlocked the door and she walked around the front of the car, taking a deep breath before she slid into the passenger seat. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap as he drove around the corner and past the alcove where the other prostitutes had already gainfully employed themselves.

"What's your name, sugar? Would remember something as sweet as you out here."

"Uh...Charlene," Eileen said with a weak smile. She figured a fake life should have a fake name.

"Hmm...Charlene," the man said, turning the name over in his mouth as though trying to savour it. "I bet I'll enjoy you a lot more than that battle-axe, Juicy Fruit. Ain't nothing juicy about her; dry as a bake at midday."

Eileen grimaced. That was dry indeed.

He pulled into an open construction site not far from where he had picked her up and made a few twists and turns until they reached the farthest corner of the massive lot. He pulled to a stop between two large mounds of gravel that hid the car from view.

"Take off your shoes, honey," he instructed as he turned off the engine.

"M-my shoes?"

"Yeah," he replied as he dragged off his pants and started touching himself with one hand.

Eileen looked away hurriedly, grateful for the darkness that hid the tears rolling down her cheeks as she fumbled with her shoes. The man picked them up and tossed them in the backseat before he slid over her, pushed up her skirt and forced himself into her. Eileen winced and bit her lip as she turned her face toward the door and closed her eyes. She hadn't done it often before, but this man, with his expensive cologne and nice car, made her feel cheap and nasty. She'd prayed for discretion, hoped for someone without a temper or sick fetishes, but somehow, this was worse.

"Put your legs on my shoulders," he moaned. Eileen did as she was told, squirming a few seconds later when she felt his lips and tongue on one of her toes.

"Ah..." he sighed. "Yes, tighten up for me."

Eileen grew nauseous, the urge to vomit rising with each manic thrust. Finally, he grunted like a scalded animal and hurriedly withdrew, leaving a slimy mess on her inner thigh before he collapsed in the driver's seat with a heavy groan.

He nodded in approval as he wiped the sheen of sweat off his face. "Nice and juicy," he murmured, nodding as he looked across at her. "I can always spot them."

He fished two bills out of his pocket and handed them to her, along with her shoes that he pulled out of the backseat. "I'll come again tomorrow night," he said in a breathless gasp as he zipped his pants.

Eileen was in a daze. The man started the car, drove off the construction site and in less than two minutes, he returned her to the corner where he'd picked her up. "Take your time and put on your shoes," he said. He glanced around as he heard a car ap-

proaching. He ducked his head and said, “But hurry up, I don’t want my wife to hear about this.”

Eileen jammed her feet in her heels, but stopped when something crackled against her soles. She held the shoe up to the windshield and peered inside. The streetlight next to the car covered the dashboard with its harsh glare, allowing Eileen to see bits of green leaves and dried stalks stuck in the tip of her shoe.

The streetlight silhouetted the man's head and shoulders as he peeped inside her shoes and shrugged sheepishly. “Sometimes I like to get a piece of action in the cane fields. A working girl like you knows how it is.”

She didn’t know how it was and didn’t care to find out how it could be. This married man, with his fancy cologne and sick desires, was someone Eileen hoped she never saw again.

Chest pounding, she opened the door and hopped out barefoot onto the sidewalk. The night air was cool and fresh, a welcome relief from the cloying stench of sex inside the car. The man pulled the door closed and pressed on the gas, racing past the traffic lights that glowed like angry red eyes in the dark. Eileen watched as the car sped around the corner, leaving her alone on the narrow city street.

Eileen dumped the cane trash out of her shoes and pulled them onto her feet before she crossed the road and headed back to her parked car. She felt like she was disintegrating, losing more and more of herself with every breath. Her thighs stuck together, the slimy film on them drying like waxy glue as she walked. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Perspiration beaded her brow. As she walked, she got angrier. But with every

step, her resolve grew. By the time she turned the corner by the peach building, Eileen vowed she would never sink so low again.

Holden

That Day and That Night

The phone echoed through the office as Holden Davis raced from the kitchen. “Good morning, Davis and Sons Funeral Home,” he said breathlessly as he looked around the office. Matilda was late again.

“Good morning,” answered a crisp voice. She sounded like the women on Dallas who schemed and shopped with their husbands’ ill-gotten oil money. “I am the widow, Lucina Carlisle. My husband, Jeffrey, passed away a few days ago in the United States and I need him collected from the airport.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mrs Carlisle. If you give me the information, I’ll arrange to collect him as soon as the plane lands.”

“Flight 267 arriving at noon,” she replied. “I’ll meet your representative at the airport and give him a deposit.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Holden as he scribbled the information in a black book.

“My husband held your father in high regard; his mother sold milk to Davis Senior for over twenty years. She always told my husband that only your establishment should be trusted with matters such as these.”

Holden smiled. It always amused him how Caribbean people expressed their loyalty, even in times like these. He thanked the widow Carlisle and put down the phone.

In the preparation room, Clifford Chase was dressing Mrs Morris. He was trying valiantly to button a tweed Chanel jacket over her copious bosom as sweat dappled his forehead in the chilly room.

“Let me help you there, Clifford,” Holden said as he lifted a sharp scalpel from a tray and slit the jacket’s double stitched sides to let out the seams. The buttons and holes slid closer together, and Clifford fastened them with a grateful sigh. Holden glanced down at Mrs Morris. It seemed a self-indulgent thing to commit oneself to the earth wearing a suit that cost enough to buy a small farm in St. Thomas. He wondered if leaving an inheritance for your children wasn’t enough to signal to the world that you were rich.

Metal instruments clattered on the tray as Clifford moved them over to the sink. He said over his shoulder, “I hear de phone ringing; who was it?”

“A lady whose husband is coming on the 267 flight from New York at lunchtime.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out to Clifford. “She asked me to send an estimate of the total. She’ll give you half of that.”

Clifford glanced at the brass hands that glinted as they ticked their way around the varnished chunk of mahogany shaped like Barbados. He took the paper and said, “Okay. I’ll go and get him now.” Clifford grinned mischievously as he went through the door. “Good luck with Matilda while I’m gone.”

Holden sighed.

* * *

Mrs Morris' viewing went without a hitch. Her children descended en masse like a flock of affected quasi-British birds, crooning over their mother and preening their designer feathers. They gathered in the brightly polished viewing room and stood vigil by her casket as they greeted family members and friends who didn't care one whit about their mother's Chanel suit. Neither did they comment on the gilded coffin and the extravagant wreaths.

Holden had seen it all before. He'd spent enough time listening to tearful confessions to know that guilt often masqueraded as grief. The irony was that neither the dead nor the living could benefit from it. Morticians were the only ones who stood to gain from apologies left unsaid.

Holden was storing the wreaths in the refrigerated room when the bell rang at the front. He dusted pollen off his fingertips to see to the visitor, but his new assistant, Matilda, popped her head through the open door and held up a hand indicating that she would greet the visitor instead. He nodded with satisfaction; Matilda was taking initiative. Despite his misgivings, he had hired Matilda after a hopeless batch of interviews that had continued for two days. Matilda had never held a job for more than a month and Holden suspected she wouldn't last very long at the funeral home either. He'd left the wanted poster on the door and had phoned the newspaper to ask them to run the ad for another week.

Matilda hadn't closed the door fully, and through the crack, Holden saw her talking to a young woman who looked like she had escaped from a scene in Flash Dance with her over-teased jheri-curls and turquoise tights. She reeked of a recent trip to the

US. Holden went back to sweeping and tidying the room so he could lock up the funeral parlour. Less than two days later, he would wish that he had intervened.

On the day of Jeffrey Carlisle's funeral, Holden and Clifford headed to the church in the hearse while Matilda followed them in her car. When Holden saw the wide cross-section of people who came to pay their respects to Jeffrey, he was so touched a tear ran down his cheek. Normally, funerals were like school cliques, filled with cliched personalities who sorted themselves according to their aspirations. This crowd ran the gamut from well-heeled socialites to dreadlocked men wearing kente cloth shirts and linen pants. But inside the church's small antechamber, Holden was shocked to see Jeffrey's mourners cascading together like the Atlantic and Pacific oceans — meeting but not mixing. The only commonality was the matching scowl worn by the woman at the front of each group: Lucina Carlisle and the woman that Holden recognized as the flash dancer from the funeral parlour. Both of them were staring down Matilda who was now crying in the middle of the antechamber.

Like missiles to a target, they seemed to sense Holden's presence and both women swung around and immediately started shouting at the tops of their voices. Holden didn't understand everything, but the snatches of conversation he heard made his armpits sweat.

He held up his hands placatingly and said, "Ladies, ladies -- I'm very sorry. Please give me a minute to figure out where the anomaly occurred."

He hurried Matilda into the usher's closet. A stained glass window overhead tinted the room a pleasant shade of rose pink which did very little to soften Holden's livid gaze. "Did that young lady come in to pay you for the funeral?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Fifty per cent," Matilda moaned, tears running down her wrinkled face. "What's wrong?"

Holden dabbed his brow with a handkerchief, his fingers fluttering nervously as he shook his head in disbelief.

"The young lady with the pink hair is Jeffrey's outside woman. The other lady is his wife."

"He had a girlfriend too?" Matilda asked, her eyes wide open.

Holden rubbed his temple and squeezed his eyes shut. "Yes." He sighed. "I hate it when this happens."

In spite of herself, Matilda's crying subsided, and she stared at Holden with a mixture of interest and confusion. "How often does this happen?"

"Too often," Holden sighed. "The last time there was so much confusion that the body didn't even show up for the church service."

Holden peeked through the stained glass window into the churchyard. Through the coloured window, the moving shapes of people looked distorted and grotesque like an apocalyptic movie. He turned to Matilda and explained, "His wife also paid a fifty per cent deposit. That means that while the funeral is paid in full, neither of them has a con-

trolling interest. The only legal recourse is that his wife technically has an official right to the body.”

Matilda tilted her head and squinted at Holden. “Wha’ that mean?”

Holden was flustered. “If I had caught this before, I could have gotten them to confuse a lawyer with this madness. We’ll just have to carry on with the funeral as usual.”

Carry on they did, with both halves of the church looking daggers at each other as they sat through two dedications, two sets of hymns and two bitterly read eulogies. Holden was thrilled when the funeral neared the end, but less than amused when he realized their troubles were not over.

In the churchyard, cuss words flew as Lucina Carlisle and Juliet Brown argued over Jeffrey’s final resting place. The pastor jumped in his car and drove off, returning with a police constable who threatened to arrest both women for disturbing the peace. Juliet fished around in her gold lamé bag until she pulled out thick sheaths of parchment paper and thrust them into the officer's hands. The papers included a will naming Juliet Nicolette Brown as the sole heir of Jeffrey Johnathan Carlisle's estate and a divorce request for J.J. Carlisle and his wife, Mrs Lucina Carlisle. Lucina fingered her wedding ring angrily, unwilling to give up her role now that Jeffrey’s sideshow was so close to a finale.

Because both of them had paid equally toward the funeral, but not toward a grave, the constable said the only way to settle it would be to take the matter to court. Until then, Holden would be Jeffrey’s legal guardian. The funeral director was agog.

“I’d rather play Scrabble with no vowels,” Holden grumbled under his breath.

Clifford rolled his eyes. “You’re a black man in a third world country. Start acting like it.”

If looks could kill, Clifford would have burst into flames and fallen into a heap of ashes. Holden finally tore his angry eyes away, straightened his coat-tails and nodded curtly to the policeman before he said, “Whatever you say, officer. Of course, the relevant storage fees will apply until this can be resolved.”

“See?” Clifford smiled quietly as he wheeled the coffin back to the hearse. “A silver lining for you.”

* * *

A bankers lamp illuminated the corner of Holden’s desk as he sat in his chair late that night. He took a gulp of single malt scotch as he stared at the ad he had run in the paper the day before. Matilda had only lasted two days. She wailed like a lost child when she said she would never return, declaring the day to be a disaster. Myriad thoughts ran through Holden’s mind as he considered his circumstances. Not the least of which was that he was babysitting a dead man that two women were fighting over when he hadn’t found an eligible woman to date in years.

Click below to learn the identity of the mystery man and find out how

Holden and Eileen meet in:

[**The Vanishing Girls by Callie Browning**](#)