

The Vanishing Girls

Callie Browning

Copyright

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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.

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Dedication

Sections of this book make reference to the lives of the incredible women who have influenced me. I stand on the shoulders of giants and for that I am eternally grateful.

Behind-the-scenes details

This novel is loosely based on the still unsolved murders of five young women which rocked Barbados from 1973 to 1982. This spate of deaths became known as the Canefield Murders because most of the victims were found in cane fields. I invoked creative license and shifted the timeline in this novel and condensed that timeframe into a year, setting it in 1984 - 1985.

I've always found the 1980s to be fascinating in terms of Barbados' culture and history. For that reason, I decided to move up the dates of the murder timelines to coincide with other critical historical moments in Barbados. The names and circumstances of all of the victims have been changed since they don't accurately represent the events. Only two facts have been maintained: the young women were found primarily in cane fields and the clue that cracked the case was a newspaper vacancy ad.

Trigger warnings

Violence against women.

Misogynistic language.

Blood.

Graphic details.

Chapter 1
The Light in the Dark

WANTED:

Office Assistant for growing business in Bridgetown.

Must be comfortable around blood & entrails.

Must own a car.

Able to work flexible hours.

Apply in person to 444 Buckworth Street, Bridgetown.

Holden looked at the ad again and wondered where he had gone wrong. Not a single applicant who turned up had fit the criteria. One thought Holden was a butcher; she didn't mind quartering loins of pork but drew the line at cutting up humans. Another lady insisted she could manage flexible hours as long as she could come after 9 a.m. and leave at 2 p.m. since she had school-aged children but no car. Holden ran his finger over the crinkled newspaper and re-read each word four times. Finally, satisfied that the fault didn't lay with him, he wiped his ink-smudged hands on his crisp white handkerchief.

He reclined in his rickety chair, his back to the world as he sighed at the ceiling. Behind him, a large window covered by sun-bleached industrial blinds overlooked Buckworth Street. It was one of the busiest roads on the city's outskirts, lined with all

manner of reputable businesses like supermarkets, doctors' offices, and accountants. But at dusk, when the flickering street lamps cast a polka-dotted line of light along the sidewalks, the street reduced itself to seedier trades. The steady cha-ching of cash registers turned into the steady click-click of high heels as ladies of the night bustled past followed by the shameful shuffling of their clients' shoes. These ladies gathered at a grimy alcove next to the pharmacy just up the road. Holden had heard of their existence but had never once encountered them.

Holden shook his head and wandered to the room at the back of the building where he kept the corpses. The smell of formaldehyde made him wrinkle his nose. He stared at the space, his mind awirl with thoughts. He was only thirty, but his life already felt hard-lived. There was too much to lose if he didn't get someone to help him. Bills were piling up, but the work wasn't. The mahogany clock on the wall chimed seven times, each peal a hollow sound that echoed off the white tiled floor. Holden fastened the door and returned to his desk. Surely no good could come from worrying about things he couldn't fix at this hour.

Holden packed his attaché case with files and took his time turning off the lights. He was securing the last window at the front of the building when he heard a steady rap on the door. Peering between the vertical blinds, Holden saw nothing. He shrugged and picked up his case. No sooner than he stepped outside, he heard a voice.

"I thought you'd never open this door," said the person silhouetted by the streetlight behind her.

Startled, he stared back at her. "Who are you?"

"Eileen. I'm applying for the job you advertised."

Her dark skirt was short, and her blouse was fashionable, even if it was too low-cut to be entirely respectable. Surely, she too had not read the description correctly.

Holden rolled his eyes and asked, "Ma'am, are you sure you're at the right place?"

Eileen grinned and quirked an eyebrow at him. "Blood, guts, my own car, flexible hours? If that's the opening, then yes, I'm at the right place."

She flicked the photocopied ad that was stuck to the door and eyed him warily. "Maybe I should talk to your boss instead."

Holden bristled, his pressure rising at the inference. "I am the boss."

"Hmm...you can't blame me for thinking otherwise," she said as she tapped her lips. "You're trying to intimidate instead of interview, which runs counter to the whole 'you're in charge' thing."

He clenched his jaw. "This job wouldn't be a good fit. You're too..." he waved his hands vaguely, unsure how to say "unsuitable" without sounding arrogant.

He caught the subtle shift of her posture, the steely resolution that took hold and told him that she was sturdier than he thought. "I'm a hard worker, I'm honest and you could do a lot worse than me."

She was right. Clearly, she was the only one who understood what was required. Holden wanted to turn her away, but so far he couldn't think of a reason to do so other than she was far and away the most beautiful of all the applicants. His reservations about good-looking assistants came from his father, who always told him to hire men or women who weren't too easy on the eyes. "Son, there are two things a businessman doesn't need: debt and distractions. The latter leads to the former, so hire accordingly."

“Miss, it’s a bit late, and I don’t know if this position would be right for you.”

She shrugged. “Once you don’t pay me with marbles, it’s right for me.”

Holden frowned, his irritation growing. “You won’t take to such a gruesome profession as this.”

“And what profession would that be?”

Holden knew now was the time to hammer home the reality. “Cutting up dead people, injecting them with chemicals and overseeing their burials.”

Eileen shrugged again and said, “Sounds like how I spent last weekend. When can I start?”

Holden squinted at her; he wasn’t sure if she was joking or depraved. Her smile, even in the dim light, was mischievous. Holden thought back on the long day he had. The countless interviews that led nowhere. The worrisome call from the bank. The bills that were piling up in the building behind him.

He pressed his fingers to his temple. Undoubtedly, hiring Eileen wouldn’t be the worst thing he ever did. He sighed and stretched out his hand toward her. She grinned and shook his in return.

* * *

The next day, Eileen drove onto the gravel lot behind the building and parked next to the detached garage that housed the hearse. In the bright light of the morning, there was no hiding that the funeral parlour could benefit from some paint and repairs. It was a sorry little affair tucked under the canopy of an old mahogany tree on the fringes of Bridgetown. Hemmed in by a bakery on the west and a hair salon on the east, shifting winds wafted the smell of jam puffs and chemical relaxers across the parlour’s car park.

A steady stream of cars drove by as Eileen sniffed the mingling scents and savoured the morning's rays on her face. It was almost June and that was the only time of day when the sun didn't have the concentrated warmth of a malfunctioning appliance. Overhead, the funeral home's sign creaked in the slipstream of a passing lorry, adding to the uneasy feeling that settled in Eileen's gut. "Working at a mortuary is better than being unemployed," she whispered as she pulled her handbag higher on her shoulder. But even that stab at positivity couldn't whisk away the fear that settled inside her. She toyed with the idea of cheering herself up with a jam puff from the bakery, but knew that she wouldn't be able to keep it down with the way her stomach was churning.

Eileen had lied. She was anything but at ease around blood and entrails. Working at a funeral parlour wasn't her childhood dream job, but it was 1984; any job was a dream job as long as you were getting paid. The global downturn of 1979 had trickled to the island's shores and left it with an unemployment rate in the high double-digits. Every job, especially low-skilled posts, was highly coveted. Which meant that holding on to fear was not an option.

Eileen walked up to the door of the faded peach building and stepped inside, marvelling at the fact that no-one had thought to change the wall colour as long as she'd known the building to be there.

What she didn't know was that the founder, Holden Davis Senior, was a savvy businessman who adhered to the teachings of P.T. Barnum with zealous fervour. In the 1950s, Holden Senior painted the building a vivid shade of peach which was unheard of at the time. When a sign was erected declaring the fruit-coloured fiasco to be Davis & Son's Funeral Parlour, there was public curiosity. Initially, people joked that there must

have been a paint shortage. During a press interview, Holden Senior quoted Barnum and said, “No one ever made a difference by being like everyone else.” The national newspapers ran front-page stories and editorials for weeks declaring the building to be a “blasphemous eye-sore” and a “sure sign of moral decay”.

That was all it took. Between the central location just a hop and skip away from the bus stand, the garish colour and low pricing, the poor and huddled masses came en masse for their burial arrangements. Somehow Holden Senior had created a business strategy heretofore unseen in the funeral world: the volume pricing model. Business boomed, and he went to his grave, certain that his offspring would carry on his legacy. Now, just a few years after his death, times had shifted, and the funeral parlour wasn't as relevant as it had been.

* * *

The bell jangled and Holden looked up to see Eileen open the front door with a bright smile on her face as she said, “Good morning!”

“Good morning,” he stood up and abandoned his tea, feeling as though the small room had gotten that much tinier once she had entered it. The front office was a small open-plan space with two desks, two chairs and a small filing cabinet partially hidden behind a room divider. He saw her stare at the rickety piles of paper on the cabinet, heard her wordless question as to why the desk was so dusty.

Holden cleared his throat and gestured to the workspace opposite his. “You can set your things down here. Well,” he clasped his hands and stepped from behind his desk. “I wasn't able to elucidate on this last night given our brief meeting, but this is a family-owned business which prides itself on delivering high quality at low prices. The

staff is small; there's Clifford Chase, he drives the hearse and does some of the preparation; his son, David, helps out part-time with collections. Otherwise, it's just me." He steeped his fingers. "Holden Davis Junior," he said as though it was an afterthought.

"I need someone to drive me to meetings and grief visits, answer the phone, do the filing and generally keep this place from crumbling around my ears." The placid smile on her face unnerved him. He cleared his throat. "Does that sound like something you can do?"

"Yup."

"Good." He straightened the lapels on his charcoal suit. "Now, be aware that death waits for no-one, not even us. Whoever gets to the scene first has the best chance of getting the client, so you must be able to ferry me around at a moment's notice. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Fine," Holden cleared his throat. "Now, there's the matter of wages." He extracted a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and offered it to Eileen. "I'm not sure what your previous package looked like..."

Eileen held back a smile. Many black women in the 1980s didn't have packages unless they were wrapped in brown paper and smelled like lamb. Wages were just enough that they didn't have to choose between feeding themselves and a beloved cat.

"...but I believe this to be fair. And I'll reimburse you for travel."

The self-restraint she exercised with her words didn't extend itself to her face. "It's fair," she replied, before she refolded it and tucked it into her bra.

Holden raised an eyebrow, thought better of replying and gestured to the stacks behind her. "Start with the filing; then we'll get to the other things. I'm stepping out now, but I'll be back soon."

She stacked the papers into a pile before pulling out a cloth and wiping the desk. Holden furrowed his brow, wondering why she kept cleaning cloths in her bag, but said nothing.

He had turned to leave when he heard her say, "Last night you made it seem like I'd be embalming corpses by the dozen this morning. Or was that to frighten me?" He stopped in his tracks as he gauged her question. She had looked up, but her hand kept a steady rhythm as she cleaned. Her eyes were alight with mirth.

Holden pursed his lips. "Well...corpses are in no hurry, so we needn't rush. These stuffy papers are bothering my sinuses." The bell on the door jingled as Holden pulled it closed, keeping time with his footsteps as he stomped off.

* * *

"God, he's uptight," she muttered as she suppressed a grin. Her new employer was broad-shouldered and clean-cut, his tailored suits not yet shiny from years of being overstarched like some elderly funeral directors she'd come across before. He had dark brown skin, striking features and beautiful teeth; Eileen suspected he'd be handsome if he'd smile and pull the stick out of his ass once in a while. She stuck her hand into her bra and pulled out the paper again. "It won't make me a Rockefeller, but it's better than nothing," she sighed as she properly took in her surroundings for the first time.

The office and its contents were old fashioned and had the washed-out pallor of a black and white film that had been colourized. Holden's desk was clinically neat; only

a black leather book and two pens rested on the polished wood. "Looks about right," she observed. Eileen's desk wasn't so fortunate. A wall of paper, bills and envelopes stared back at her from every square inch of the desktop. Eileen realized with a sinking stomach that Holden didn't plan to train her. She was a woman, after all, so he assumed she understood office procedures. The truth was that she had started cleaning to buy time.

She turned to the grey filing cabinet next to the desk and pulled open the drawers. Her forehead crumpled. There were two files: Bills and Funerals. The shabby folders had faded from butter yellow to a grimy off-white and were stuffed to the gills with unsorted receipts and invoices. Clearly, her predecessors didn't understand office procedures either. She sighed and sat down to work.

By the time lunch rolled around, she had labelled twenty-seven manila folders and filed away half of a stack of papers. As she worked, she kept hearing the muffled sound of furniture being moved around in the room behind her. Figuring that no harm could come from giving herself a tour of the place, Eileen pushed herself away from the desk. Behind Holden's desk was a louvred yellow door where the kitchenette/lunchroom resided. Next to her desk were two doors; a frosted glass one with gold lettering declaring it to be the Prep Room and a varnished oak door on the right. She thought it wise to leave the Prep Room for another day. She wasn't sure what surprises lay behind that door. She pushed the door to the right.

The large square space was cold and ringed with stacks of wooden folding chairs that leaned against the chestnut wainscoting. A man who resembled a daddy-long-legs was humming *We've Only Just Begun* as he polished the panelled walls with something

in a yellow jar that smelled like citrus. He looked like a dark-skinned hippie with his tie-dyed shirt and zealously patterned pants.

“Good morning. I’m Eileen. Are you Clifford?”

He spun around, flecks of polish flying from the rag onto the wainscoting. “Ah, yes, yes. De boss man tell me a new girl starting.” He wiped his hands down the front of his pants as he studied her for a moment; the orange streaks blended into the pattern seamlessly. You prettier than the last two though,” Clifford said, as though it was important she knew that.

Eileen blushed and laughed. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

He scratched his face, leaving a shiny stain beneath his handlebar moustache. “I did a little concerned to be honest. I even tell he to get glasses because I thought he couldn’t see that dey didn’t doing a good job either.” He squinted at Eileen as though trying to find competence etched in the lines of her face. He nodded, satisfied. “You more serious than them.”

Eileen nodded, her eyes afire with amusement. Clifford had a knack for saying things in a way that wasn’t offensive, each sentence sounding like an observation that only just crossed his mind. She liked him.

She extended a hand to Clifford. “Nice to meet you.” She glanced at the jar by his feet. “That polish smells nice.”

He beamed, his face alight with pride. “Yeah, I does make it myself. I learn this at my grandfather knee, Lord rest his soul. Davis Senior put he in the ground and I polish up the casket myself with this same oil right here.”

He cocked his head to the side before saying soberly, "Good luck with de new job, sweet girl. This life ain't for everybody." Behind the closed door, the rotary phone rang with a muffled jangle like it was underwater.

Clifford screwed the cap on the jar and raised an eyebrow at her. "That phone like de grim reaper he-self. I suggest you answer it."

Eileen spun around and rushed to her desk. She lifted the black rotary phone's receiver, her pen poised over a notepad as Clifford came into the room behind her while wiping his hands on a clean cloth. He was impassive as he watched the colour drain from her face. He waited until she'd hung up and asked, "Where am I headed?"

Eileen stared back at him, her fingers and face numb with shock. "Huxley."

Chapter 2

When Blood Runs Cold

The month of May might have been rolling to a close, but the harvest season was in full swing. Every factory buzzed with activity as Bedford trucks rolled in, their cargo beds stuffed with fat stalks of sugar cane. Managers paced in front of chalkboards filled with quotas and yields that haunted them at night. A sick engineer or broken down truck brought out cold sweats and ulcer pills. But sometimes, these mundane obstacles paled in comparison to life's more grisly problems.

Such was the case that morning when a short, slim manager with a balding pate, named Herman Walkes, pulled out what was left of his hair after he got the disturbing news. Walkes slammed a red helmet onto his head, stormed across the yard and into the factory. He marched past the massive roller where the aroma of pressed cane juice wafted into the air, past the boilers, and into the engine room where the scent of molasses gave way to the stench of engine grease. Behind the heavy iron door, a small crowd gathered around the controls. They looked up in unison as Walkes threw up his hands and huffed, "What the ass happen now?"

Gibson, the line supervisor, stepped forward. He clutched his clipboard tightly and said, "Well, I loaded the cane on the belt and everything start moving down the line. I ain't see nothing funny 'til John shout that something catches up in the number three press and tell me to stop it. I hit the override the same time." Sweat beaded on Gibson's

top lip, and he shuffled his feet as he glanced at the press from the corner of his eye.

“Then I see something in the basket.”

Walkes squinted at Gibson. He'd barely heard him over the puffing and squealing of the machinery, and the story made no sense. His irritation grew as Gibson spoke again.

“So I call you because you is the man in charge.”

“Gibson, stop talking all over your face. Show me the problem!”

The tall, stocky man pointed at the belt leading to the cane crusher's heavy iron teeth. There, intertwined among the tangle of canes, was a woman's bent leg under the hem of a yellow dress.

Walkes stepped gingerly toward the body, the engine's clanking and wheezing fading around him as though he'd fallen headlong into an alternate reality. A light breeze swept through the vent shaft and across the conveyor belt, fluttering the woman's dress and making his heart skip a beat. After a few seconds, sure that the young lady would never move again, he fainted.

By the time Walkes came to, his head throbbing from the generous bump on his noggin, production at Huxley Sugar Factory had been ground to a halt and the police had been summoned. Every piece of machinery was silenced, their motors put to rest as the plant was declared a crime scene and investigations began. Walkes gave his statement to an officer, conveniently leaving out the time he'd spent sprawled on the floor. He shouted every word of his account, his mind unable to reconcile the fact that Huxley was quiet for the first cane season in over thirty years.

Police milled about in the yard questioning workers as investigators with gloved hands collected anything that might be connected to the woman's discovery.

Photojournalists wiggled camera lenses between rusty chain links, searching out the best angles to capture the unfolding saga on film. Such a gripping story would guarantee healthy newspaper sales the next day.

The funeral home's unmarked van arrived in the factory yard and removed the body around noon. Just down the road in a freshly cut field, uniformed officers combed through rotting heaps of cane trash for clues, a more daunting task than searching for a needle in a haystack.

It was the second body found in a cane field that year, both of them young women who had gone missing shortly before they had been found. The first victim, Anna Broomes, had disappeared one sunny Thursday morning after she'd waved goodbye to her neighbour and said she would return later that day. But it was not to be. The neighbour promptly went into labour and delivered a bouncing baby boy the next morning. She didn't notice that Anna hadn't returned until a week later when the phone in the apartment above kept ringing and waking her newborn.

That murder had perplexed the public for days before being swallowed up by the news cycle. Anna had been relegated to the annals of history until the discovery at Huxley. Now Anna's name was being dusted off, and new life breathed into her disappearance. Word spread like wildfire that another body had been found, renewing the public's thinly veiled zeal for mystery and intrigue.

Eileen had expected Clifford to return with a sad face and drooped shoulders when he returned around closing time, but his lope was as even and measured as it

was when he left. She'd certainly felt nauseous when she'd passed on the message about going to the sugar factory. Clifford seemed to sense Eileen's nerves; he smiled at her but his face sobered when he looked across at Holden. Clifford flicked his eyes to the right and went into the viewing room. Holden took the hint and followed him, closing the door softly behind him.

Eileen eased her chair as near to the door as she could, a manila folder and hole punch on her lap as a plausible excuse in the event she was caught eavesdropping.

"Before I forget, your boy was there today," chuckled Clifford.

"Oh, was he now? I imagine he's not too pleased that we got the body and he didn't."

"It's a *bloody* shame, ain't it?" Clifford chuckled. "I think what really annoyed him was that Derricks sent a bike cop with me so I could get to the morgue faster. You know how that kinda thing gets his dander up."

"The commissioner sent an outrider? Why?"

"Told me not to say anything, but I going to tell you. He holding a press conference tonight. Seven o'clock TV news."

Holden's voice was low and urgent. Eileen held her breath and pressed her ear against the door, straining to hear Holden's voice as he asked, "Clifford, what are you telling me?"

Clifford's disgust was evident as he said, "Boss, this real serious. Something ain't right."

"Meaning?"

“Meaning that I was doing this for long enough to know when to get worried and right now I worried because...”

The phone rang, startling Eileen and making her curse as she rolled her chair to the desk to snatch the receiver. She gave the person directions to the funeral home as quickly as she could, rolling her eyes every time he misspelt ‘Buckworth Street’. By the time she’d hung up, Holden and Clifford were coming out of the room and neither of them said much as they closed the building for the day. Eileen sighed. She’d have to watch the evening news to learn more.

The gas attendant who filled her tank talked animatedly to the other attendant, both of them exchanging snippets of conversation and shocked gasps. The roar of traffic at the nearby intersection drowned out much of what they were saying but Eileen caught the words “sugar factory” and knew that word had begun to spread. In an island with just over a quarter of a million people, bad news spread quicker than cheap margarine. At the supermarket, women bent their heads together and complained bitterly about men who took out their insecurities on females, preferring to take the lives of innocent females before they improved themselves.

But no where was the fury of the gossip more robust than in the rum shop. As Eileen drove down the gravel road toward her apartment building, she couldn’t miss the crowd that spilled out of the doors as everyone exchanged rumours over glasses of rum and coke.

Eileen got home in time to turn on the TV knob to see the ending of the news intro. She stood in front of the television set, her dusty shoes still on her feet and her eyes glued to the screen. The television anchor outlined the grim details of the

discovery before a montage of images appeared. The exterior of the sugar factory, the young woman's pretty smile as she posed for her newly printed ID card, crying relatives huddled outside the factory's gate. The newscaster's disembodied voice identified the young woman as Lydia James before the screen switched to live footage of Hugh Derricks, the new police commissioner. Derricks shuffled his papers as he greeted viewers and then cleared his throat and fixed his gaze on the prepared statement in front of him.

"Today at 9:45 a.m. members of the Royal Police Force were summoned to Huxley Sugar Factory to investigate the discovery of a deceased female. She has been identified as seventeen-year-old Lydia James of Number Eight, Wicklow Gardens. Given the evidence, the RPF is treating this as an unnatural death."

He went on, "The Police Force has reason to believe that this death is connected to that of twenty-two-year-old Anna Broomes who was discovered in March in Marrilow Fields and Nora Edwards of Morris Hall who was found at the Golden Greens Golf Course last year. Although the victims are not known to each other, it is believed that these murders are being perpetrated by a single individual."

Across the country, from plush living rooms in the heights and terraces to tight tenantry homes in rural lanes, fathers bolted doors and mothers slammed sash windows as telephones rang in unison. Sadness turned to confusion and every Barbadian's blood ran cold. For the first time in the island's history, a serial killer was on the loose.

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