

Vanishing
ACT

Charm & Deceit

JENNIFER ALLEE *and*
LISA KARON RICHARDSON



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

VANISHING ACT
Charm & Deceit ~ Book Two

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Dedication

From Lisa

To Helen Shoemaker. Gone, but not forgotten.
She lives on in every word I write.

From Jen

To the Saturday Night Game Group: Nate and Cora,
James and Kayce, Kyle and Emily, Billy, and junior members
Isaac and Perrin. Our times of food, fun, fellowship, and nearly
nonstop laughter recharge my creative batteries more than
you know. You are all dear to my heart, and I thank God
for each one of you!

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—*Lisa and Jen*

Chapter 1

May 6, 1862
Washington, D.C.

Juliet palmed the thin stack of note cards on the table and slid them up her sleeve. Her fingers trembled as they always did before a “show.” No matter. They’d be steady when it counted.

Grandmotherly Miss Clara smoothed Juliet’s pale skirts. “You’ve got a new sitter. A young fellow.”

“Do we know anything about him?”

“Artie’s checking now.”

Juliet pressed the heel of her hand against her stomach. The queasiness would pass, too.

“This is all I found. It was in the lining of his hat.” Miss Clara passed her a folded ticket stub for Ford’s Athenaeum and a battered-looking letter with countless creases.

Juliet accepted the offerings and opened the letter. No, not a letter. She raised an eyebrow and looked at Miss Clara. “This is a pass that allows the bearer to move through Union lines.”

Miss Clara glanced up from her examination of a tiny stain on Juliet’s hem and met her eyes.

“So, he’s doing war work?”

“Apparently important work. It’s signed by President Lincoln.”
Miss Clara took the paper from Juliet’s trembling fingers.

Why would anyone carry such a document in a place as obvious as a hatband? Though ostensibly he was in the heart of Union territory and it wouldn’t be required, the pass granted access anywhere. That meant he’d come from beyond Union lines, in rebel territory. But, in rebel territory, who would want such a pass on him? Juliet sat down at the kitchen table. Something about this man felt dangerous. The pass identified him as Carter Forbes. The name meant nothing to her, and yet something niggled at the back of her mind. She *should* know about him.

Artie clattered down the stairs, his brown hair disheveled as usual, and leaped over the last few steps, landing with a thump. “Nothing.”

“Did you try to cross-reference him?”

Artie tilted his head and scowled in response.

Juliet held up a hand. “I had to ask. It seems that I should know the name.” She rubbed the furrows from between her eyebrows. She hated blind readings; they were so tricky. “Did he say how he learned of my sittings?”

Artie shook his head. “I don’t think so. The Professor never said anything.”

The Professor entered at that moment. “They’re all ready for you.”

“Do you know anything about this Carter Forbes fellow?”

The question seemed to pain the old gentleman, and Juliet winced at her own callousness. The Professor used to draw enormous crowds through the power of his observations about people; but now, his eyesight was shrouded by milky white cataracts, which meant he noticed very little.

“He came to the front door and asked if he could attend today’s sitting. He spoke well, and when I took his hat, I noted it was of fine felt. I asked if he had been referred by one of your

clients, and he said no. He didn't seem to want to offer any further information."

It wasn't an unusual reaction. Many new clients were hesitant and wanted her to prove her skills by astonishing them with information about themselves.

Juliet inhaled and held the breath for a long moment before letting it out in a rush. She could do this. She had to do this. If she turned away clients, it wouldn't be long before she and her make-shift family were turned out of their home. She just couldn't go back to the vaudeville circuit. Not if she was to have any hope of keeping them all together. One day, she would find a better way to support them. But for now, well, she had no choice.



Carter covertly examined his companions around the smooth oak table: a half dozen well-dressed ladies, most of them older than he, all but one of whom were in mourning; and a tall, rickety man with a snowy beard that reached his waist. The individuals in the group appeared to have at least a nodding acquaintance with one another, and they sat in companionable silence as they waited for Miss Avila.

The peaceful hush proved to be too much for a twittery sort of elderly lady to Carter's right. She wore a full dress of black bombazine that looked far too warm for the summer heat. Her hair was frizzled into the semblance of ringlets that wilted on either side of her cheeks. She leaned closer to him and smiled kindly. "I don't think I've met you before. Is this your first visit to Miss Avila?"

One of the ladies sniffed at this breach of social etiquette, but the others looked interested and friendly, as if the mere fact of their gathering in this room conferred a special kind of privilege.

Squelching the desire to educate them on the certainty they were being duped, Carter pasted on a smile for the lady and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Is she as impressive as they say?"

“More so, I think.” She beamed at him. “Miss Avila has such a way about her. She’s so mystical and otherworldly. I completely see why the spirits choose to seek her out.”

The bearded gentleman cleared his throat. “She’s not like some as you’ll find—they show-offs with their painted-up faces and tricks. She’s a good little gal, the kind my Emmeline would have taken under her wing. The kind I would have wanted for my boy.” His words choked off, and he blew his nose into a large handkerchief.

Carter wanted to pat him on the shoulder or offer some reassurance, but he couldn’t allow himself the liberty. The fellow was austere and proud in his grief. Any expression of pity would likely inflict further hurt. How could someone take advantage of these poor people?

The door opened, and a slip of a young woman entered. Her dark hair was pinned up in a neat chignon. She wore a simple cotton day dress with stripes of soft white and pale purple, unadorned except for a strip of lace edging the collar and running from the bodice to the belt line. The sleeves were certainly long, and roomy enough to hide all sorts of goodies. But he didn’t see any telltale bulges. He and the other gentleman stood at her entrance.

“I’m sorry to have kept you all waiting.” Her voice was well-modulated and cultured. There was a whiff of foreign climes beneath the excellent English, but Carter couldn’t quite place the accent.

She circled around the table to the only available seat. Carter had engineered matters so that she would be seated right beside him. Miss Avila lightly touched the elderly gentleman’s arm as she passed. “Mr. Greenfield, how are you today?”

If Carter didn’t know better, he would think she was genuinely concerned.

“Thank you for asking, my dear. I am much as usual.”

“You haven’t had bad news from the War Office about Ben, have you?”

Aha. She was fishing for information.

“No, I’ve had no word. Been at least four months since his last letter.” His voice cracked.

Miss Avila reached out and squeezed his hand. “We will pray for his safekeeping. But, in this case, no news is good news. Keep up your faith.”

She approached her seat but stopped in front of Carter. “You must be Mr. Forbes,” she said pleasantly.

“I am.”

“I am Miss Avila.” She smoothed her skirts as she lowered herself delicately into the chair. “Is there someone in particular you are hoping to reach today?”

“I thought you’d be able to tell me that, and all the mysteries of the world besides,” he shot back.

A sharp gasp came from the lady on Carter’s other side. The disapproval in the room radiated toward him in waves.

Miss Avila, however, maintained her calm. “I’m afraid I cannot read your mind. I suppose there are some who may be able to do so, but my gifts do not lie in that direction. If you wish to get the attention of those on the other side, it would be best for me to know whom to ask for.”

“My father, Jonathan Forbes,” Carter blurted out. Immediately, he regretted it. He didn’t want to sully Father’s memory with anything this woman might say about him. But another idea sprang to mind. “And my sister, Emily.” He smiled then, trying not to bare his teeth in the process. *Just let her try to get out of this one.*

Miss Avila had a knack for giving a person her full attention. When she turned her lovely dark eyes to her manservant and motioned for him to close the curtains, it was as though a lighthouse beacon had moved away from his soul.

As the room darkened, she leaned forward to light the single taper in the middle of the table. The manservant departed through a noticeably squeaky door. The candlelight flickered, casting grotesque shadows on the walls around them.

“We must now join hands.”

It took all of Carter’s self-control to keep from rolling his eyes. Of course, if they held hands, no one would be free to catch whoever might cavort about in the darkness beyond the edge of the candlelight to help the woman create her weird effects.

He took the hand she offered in his and held it tightly, to be certain she could not pull away. She made no attempt to do so. Her small, soft hand rested warmly in his, neither grasping nor trying to break free of his grip. Her eyes drifted closed.

Carter sat rigid, straining every sense to discover her means of trickery. Except for the occasional tiny pop from the candle, there was no sound in the room. The silence allowed the sounds outside to press inward—a city symphony of rumbling carriage wheels, clip-clopping hooves, and shouting street hawkers. Somewhere across the street, a piano played a popular ditty. The world was going on all around them, but, shut away in this dark and silent room, they were set apart.

At last, Miss Avila began to speak. She brought a message from the dead to each of the ladies in turn—words of enduring love, whether from a parent, husband, or child, that made them dab at their eyes with lace hankies. Finally, she asked for Catherine Greenfield.

The old fellow shifted, sitting taller. “Catherine? Catherine, are you there?”

“I’m here, Harlan.” Miss Avila now spoke with a slight Southern accent.

“My Catherine. I’ve longed to hear your voice again.”

“We talked before I left. You promised you wouldn’t grieve like this.”

"I know. But I'm just not sure how to get on without you. And now, Ben's gone off, and...and I'm scared he won't come back."

"You must live on, Harlan. Ben's children need a man about to help keep them in hand. Look to the living, my dear. Look to the living."

Carter raised an eyebrow. That was not the message he'd expected.

Mr. Greenfield leaned toward the candle, his features taut with anxiety. "Are you telling me Ben is there with you?"

"No, dear."

"You're sure?"

"Harlan Greenfield, I think I'd know my own son."

Tears glistened on the old fellow's face. "Oh, thank God. Thank God."

Miss Avila spoke again. "Catherine is gone. Is there an Emily Forbes there who will speak with me?"

Carter searched the woman's face, but it gave away nothing. She waited patiently as the silence in the room again allowed the outside world to intrude.

At last, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Forbes; the woman you seek is not on the other side."

Carter clamped his lips together. She was cunning, he had to hand her that. He had counted on her revealing herself as a fraud by claiming to talk to Emily, who was very much alive and well.

He forced himself to continue the charade. "And my father?"

Once again, Miss Avila appeared to consult with an invisible host.

"He is there but unable to speak to me directly."

Carter hid a sneer. "He suffered so much during his final illness. I want to make sure he is no longer in pain."

"There is no illness or suffering in the other world. He says you should not worry about him." Though she didn't open her eyes, Miss Avila's delicate brow furrowed emphatically. "Nor should

you be concerned about your disagreement prior to his passing. It was a small matter, and you must not allow it to prey on your mind.”

Carter nearly let go of her hand. How could she possibly know about that?

Miss Avila’s frown deepened, and she shook her head a couple of times. Then her eyes popped open. “They are gone.” She began to tremble from head to foot and slumped slightly, as if the contact with ghosts had sapped her strength.

She clapped her hands lightly, and the door opened again with another squeal. Carter was nearly convinced that was by design, for all the other appointments in the establishment were in perfect taste. Why would she abide a squeaky door, unless it was a deliberate flaw designed to reinforce the idea that the sitters were entirely alone—that no one else could have entered or exited?

Miss Avila bid her guests farewell, shaking their hands and giving each one a few personal words. She asked about family members and various ills. Took notice of a new bonnet and complimented a handsome necklace. The sitters seemed to brighten under her attention, as if she’d lit a lamp within them.

At last, Carter alone remained with her. He realized afresh how small she was; how her eyes, though dark, were bright and... kind. Once again, she surprised him, and he fumbled for words.

With practiced ease, she stepped in to save him from embarrassment. “Thank you for coming today, Mr. Forbes. I hope you found it enlightening.”

“To be honest, I had hoped for more.”

“Perhaps you are unaware that a sitter’s attitude can affect the ability of the spirits to communicate clearly. Tell me, did one of my clients refer you?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

She cocked her head prettily, waiting for an answer.

Carter decided it wouldn't hurt to let her stew. He smiled back wolfishly but didn't elaborate further.

Miss Avila stilled like a rabbit scenting a nearby predator.



Juliet didn't dare move for fear she would give away her agitation. Mr. Forbes was even more than she'd bargained for. A tall man with neatly combed light brown hair and a well-groomed mustache of the same color, he was the sort who might be dismissed if one were fool enough not to notice the intelligence in his gray eyes and the muscular build beneath that stylish coat.

Juliet was no fool. She would not underestimate this man. He wasn't the type to approach a medium. That meant he'd had a very definite purpose in seeking her out. If that purpose had anything to do with the work that had earned him a pass signed by President Lincoln, she could find her goose cooked.

On the other hand, it could very well have to do with his not-so-dearly-departed sister. As soon as he'd mentioned Emily, Juliet had made the connection. No wonder the name Carter Forbes was so familiar. But did he know of her acquaintance with his sister? At that moment, Juliet remembered something else Emily Forbes had mentioned about her older brother: He was a Pinkerton agent working for the government.

That certainly explained the pass. What it didn't explain was what he wanted with her.

"I always like to get to know my new clients," she finally said. "Would you care to join me for tea in the sitting room?"

His smile was thin-lipped. "I'd be delighted."

Juliet led the way. "Please have a seat. I just need to speak to my housekeeper a moment."

Once out of sight, she all but ran for the kitchen. Miss Clara and Professor Marvolo were seated at the table.

"All done, dear?" Miss Clara slid a tray of cookies toward her.

“Forbes is a Pinkerton and he wants something, I know it.”

Professor Marvolo turned his clouded gaze toward her. “Describe him.”

Juliet had spent years under the professor’s tutelage. As quickly as she could, she described everything the Pinkerton had said and done, in addition to his appearance. “I had a bad feeling about him from the beginning, so I kept the sitting very simple. No spirit writing. I didn’t want to do anything that he could seize upon.”

“Very wise.” The professor nodded over his fingertips, which he had pressed together as if in prayer. “He’s here on a personal matter.”

“Are you sure? How can you tell?”

“If this were an official investigation, he wouldn’t still be fooling around with tea and verbal sparring. Besides, the Pinkertons are all working for the war effort, in one way or another, and we don’t have a thing to do with that.”

“What should I do?”

“You have to go back in there and talk to him. Find out what he wants. This could be a good thing. Having a Pinkerton on our side might be beneficial.”

Miss Clara patted her arm. “I’ll bring in tea directly.”

Juliet clenched her hands into fists. She could do this. She had to do this. They were counting on her. And while she was not certain they would benefit from having a Pinkerton on their side, it would be a total disaster to have a Pinkerton as an enemy.

She returned to the sitting room. Once again, Mr. Forbes stood as she entered.

“I apologize for the delay. Tea will be brought directly.”

“That sounds good.” He sat as she did. “I’m curious, how long have you had this gift of being able to talk to spirits?”

She smiled. “Anyone can talk to spirits. They are the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ that surround us. The real trick is being able to

hear them talk back." She decided to press her luck. "Mr. Forbes, now I must ask you a question."

"Certainly."

"Why did you try to make me believe your sister was dead?"

He slid back in his chair. "I think you know the answer."

"It was a test, then?"

He nodded. "You passed that one with ease."

Juliet watched him warily. "That one? Was there another test?"

"Oh, yes," he said smugly. "My father didn't die of a lingering illness. He was murdered."

Now Juliet settled back in her seat. "Perhaps you should think over the conversation again. I merely said that there was no illness on the other side, and that he said not to worry about him."

Artie entered, carrying a tray of tea things.

Alarmed, Juliet sat forward again. She didn't want him anywhere near this man. "Artie?"

"Miss Clara asked me to bring this to you." With his back to the agent, he gave her a broad wink.

Juliet refrained from making a face at him.

"And who is this strapping young lad?" Mr. Forbes asked in a too jovial voice.

"This is my son," Juliet said evenly. "Artie, make your bows."

Forbes looked from her to Artie and back again.

Juliet answered the unasked question. "He is adopted."

"I see. It must be difficult, supporting such a large house, as well as a family."

Juliet felt as if a hand had tightened around her windpipe. "Artie, go on back to the kitchen and help Miss Clara." Her eyes warned him not to argue.

When he was gone, Mr. Forbes stood. "Miss Avila, I grow tired of sparring with you. We both know you are a fraud. If I have to, I will send agents by the dozens until someone exposes

you. Then I will smear your name in every salon and parlor in the capital. You will never have another client."

Mouth dry as parchment, Juliet tilted her chin up a notch. "May I know what I have done to earn your enmity?"

"I have a young person I am responsible for, as well. My sister, Emily, whom you introduced to spiritualism."

Juliet frowned. "Emily sat for me only once, and she was brought by a neighbor."

"Once was far more than enough. She now believes that she can, in a way, resurrect our parents and keep them close at hand. She's been taken in by a spurious English nobleman who claims to have powers remarkably similar to your own."

Juliet knew immediately of whom he spoke. "Lord" Shelston was gaining quite a following in the area, but he could be cruel and exceptionally greedy, as well, draining his clients of their resources and then discarding them.

"If your worry is with Shelston, why come after me?"

Carter shook his head. "I am not a complete idiot. If I attack her pet directly, Emily will simply consider me too protective. I must tackle this problem at the root."

"And you believe I am the root of the problem?" She laughed roughly. "Mr. Forbes, my influence is nowhere near as great as you take it to be."

"Not at all, Miss Avila. I realize your clientele is small, by most standards. But, by shutting down your operation, and those like yours, it lights a fire under Shelston's feet. He'll soon find Washington a very inhospitable place."

Mind awlirl, Juliet sought a way out of this dilemma. "I know Shelston, and I agree with you as to his basic character. I don't want to see your sister involved with him any more than you do. So, I have a proposal."

Carter raised a questioning eyebrow, so Juliet rushed on.

“I’ll go with you and tell Emily all I know about him and how he achieves his illusions.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Your word that you will leave my family and me in peace.”

She could imagine Forbes’s thought process: weighing the pros and cons; deliberating what his sister’s well-being was worth to him; contemplating whether he could live with himself if he let a small fish swim free in order to catch the larger fish he was after.

Finally he held out his hand. “You have a bargain, Miss Avila.”

She grabbed it before he could change his mind and pumped it forcefully. The deal had been struck.