

JULIE
AND THE
PHANTOMS
The Edge of Great

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Scholastic Inc.



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Julie

My best friend, Flynn, is amazing: super caring, totally enthusiastic and supportive, and always up for fun. She's basically my other half, and there was no one I'd rather brave the crowded and competitive hallways of Los Feliz Performing Arts High School with. But hot dang, the girl is not someone who shies away from saying what's on her mind.

She cornered me this morning just beside my locker. I was battling with the combination, head down, trying to blend into the walls under the brim of my baseball cap, when she cozied over.

"Hey, underachiever," she sang, the glint in her eyes telling me she was (mostly) joking.

"Hey, disappointment." Best friend or not, I could serve it right back with the best of them.

Flynn cocked a hip and peered at me, curious. “Okay, I know you don’t want me to ask, but have you decided what you’re gonna do today?”

Had I decided? No. Spent hours the night before, tossing and turning in my bed, considering, yes. But that was way different from deciding. “I’ll know in the moment,” I bluffed, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

Flynn was *not* impressed. “Really? That’s all you’re giving me? Jules, Mrs. Harrison said this is your last chance.”

As if I needed a reminder. I swallowed. I hadn’t been able to bring myself to play the piano since my mother died a year ago. Music was her passion, and it was the thing that connected us. Every time I sat down at the bench to prepare, my chest felt tight and fluttery. Playing piano now that Mom was gone? It felt pointless. Worse than pointless . . . it felt like a *betrayal* of her, and her spirit.

But it was getting harder and harder to justify my place in a *performing arts school specialty program* when I couldn’t seem to bring myself to, well . . . *perform*.

“I know,” I said to Flynn, more matter-of-factly than I was feeling inside. “I was there.”

I expected some tough love from Flynn, but she’d turned, caught on something going on over my shoulder. “Ugh, what’s *she* handing out?”

I turned to see who she was looking at. *Carrie*. Of course. Swanning down the halls like she owned the school. Her golden hair tumbled angelically over her

shoulders and, of course, somehow the fluorescent lighting of the hallways cast a perfect shining spotlight on her expertly coordinated outfit.

You know how in those old movies from the nineties, there's always that classic "mean girl" type? Blonde, cute, always dressed head to toe in the latest trends—says whatever's on her mind, no matter how nasty it might seem?

Yeah, *that* type. That was Carrie, to a T. Never mind that we'd actually grown up as friends—those days were long gone.

And judging from the smug smile on her lips right now, she was currently in the throes of planning and/or executing something particularly diabolical. Or if not necessarily *diabolical*, at least it would be annoying. And it seemed to involve printed flyers.

"Here you go," she said, gliding up to me and thrusting a flyer in my face. She ignored Flynn's disgusted look. "My group's performing at the spirit rally tomorrow." She gave me a withering once-over. "I'm sure you guys have nothing better to do."

Ugh, Carrie's group, Dirty Candi. Flynn and I always assumed that her dad gave her music career a boost. (Not that we blamed her for taking it.) Her father was Trevor Wilson, the famous musician. He's, like, a *huge* star. One of his songs was even featured in a car commercial! *My* dad said it was selling out a little bit, but . . . come on! A

commercial! Anyway, I figured Carrie's always had her dad in her corner . . . and she and *I* have always been in opposite corners of the ring.

Still, no matter how much support Carrie seemed to get from her dad, it was nothing compared to my mom and me. She was my biggest champion.

But there's that word again: *was*. And since she died, it's become hard for me to . . . I don't know, face the music? But, like, literally.

Flynn threw a look at Carrie. "Oh my gosh, Carrie, thanks." Her voice dripped with scorn.

Carrie glared at her. "Oh my gosh, Flynn, don't bother coming."

Carrie's boyfriend, Nick, appeared and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, glancing at me as if to apologize for her attitude.

I gave a small, imperceptible shrug. There was no apologizing for Carrie. And *no* accounting for what Nick saw in her. It was so wrong, the two of them together.

I watched them move off down the hall. But that imperceptible moment between Nick and me? Yeah, not as subtle as I'd hoped. Flynn doesn't miss a beat.

She gave me a look. "Nick? Still? You know those two are gonna get married and have a bunch of unholy babies."

"Nick's a sweetheart," I protested.

"Too bad his girlfriend's a spoiled brat." Flynn nudged

me. “There’s that smile.” She linked an arm through mine. “Now, let’s go prove everyone wrong.”



The music room at Los Feliz High School was more like a cathedral than a performance space; for everyone in our arts program, music was a kind of religion. The program was competitive, audition-only, and we all had to earn our spot here. We had to keep earning it, too, throughout our time in school.

Meanwhile, my time? Well, it was running out. And there was a line of students out the proverbial door who’d be thrilled to take my spot if I didn’t find a way to get my muse back. The principal had made my options crystal clear—it was now or never. If I couldn’t play, I couldn’t stay.

When Flynn and I entered the room, Nick was finishing up his own showcase: Smiling that easy, open grin of his, he was absolutely shredding it, wailing classical music on his electric guitar. It was the opposite of what you’d expect to hear from that instrument—which made it totally Nick. He fit in with everyone, all the time, and he made things that felt worlds apart, at least to the rest of us, converge seamlessly. *There* was a guy who never had a problem tapping into his muse.

As he finished his piece and gave a little bow, the room broke into applause. Carrie sat front and center,

cheering loudly and beaming at her boyfriend. Mrs. Harrison, the music teacher, stepped forward.

“Nice job, Nick. Almost as impressive as your last game against Glendale.”

(What did I say about Nick being good at *everything*?)

She searched the room, resting her gaze on me. “Okay, that leaves us with one last performance. Julie?”

It felt like the eyes of every single person in the room were trained on me. I swallowed; my throat was dry.

Flynn leaned in. “You got this,” she whispered.

I cleared my throat, taking off my hat and shaking off my coat. I walked toward the center of the room, where the piano awaited me, like I was walking a plank. Every footstep I took thundered in my ears. As I moved past her, Carrie leaned over to whisper something to Nick, but I tried to shut her (and the rest of the room) out.

One step at a time, I told myself, trying to channel some of Flynn’s confidence. *You can do this.*

Sit at the bench. Hands over the keys. Foot on the pedal.

I tried, I really did. I saw it in my head: I began to play. Just a few bars, the notes sounding stiff and uncertain for a minute. But then it was like . . . I don’t know, sort of like coming alive, like a big overhead stretch when you first wake up in the morning. It felt open, and free, and . . . *right*.

Until Mom’s face appeared in my mind, too, bright and loving, blocking out everything else in the room.

Back in real life, my fingers froze as a bowling ball sank to the base of my stomach. I couldn't do this. I didn't belong here. Not anymore.

Without a word, I jumped up, grabbed my things, and ran from the room.

Behind me, I could hear all my classmates reacting. Some were surprised—gasping, murmuring to one another. I didn't dare glance at Flynn. I couldn't stand her worrying or feeling sorry for me. And above all the whispers rose Carrie's voice, clear and as sharp as glass. She was eating this all up, like I would have expected.

“Is this the part when we clap?”

Flynn caught up to me in the stairwell. “Julie!” Her voice echoed against the walls, tinny and high with worry.

I stopped and turned. What was there to say?

“They're gonna kick you out of music.” She said it plainly. Flynn and I were always straight with each other.

So I was going to be straight with her now, too. I took a deep breath. “I'm done, Flynn.”

I ran off before she could say anything else.