

Juli Dorne: Play of Hearts (vol. I)

- An irresistibly magical romantasy – for fans of Stephanie Garber and Adalyne Grace
- Illusionists and soul, time and elemental magicians - four families who fought together and then became mortal enemies
- The second volume of the duology is to be published in Autumn 2025



Juli Dorne
Play of Hearts (vol. I)

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ENGLISH
SAMPLE
TRANSLATION
AVAILABLE

Magic is treacherous. Wishes are dangerous. Love is unfathomable.

Many years ago, Evie promised her heart to an unknown boy in her grandmother's magical hall of mirrors in exchange for having her deepest wish fulfilled: a friend. But she paid a high price. Ever since, her hands have brought death to everyone she touches. Now she has met Arthur, and her wish for someone who finally loves her seems to be coming true. But Evie's curse makes it impossible for them to be together. And when they can no longer resist the temptation to come closer, Arthur pays too high a price for his love for Evie. The only person who can help Evie and Arthur is the inscrutable Rémi. However, he hides many secrets – any one of which could break Evie's heart ...



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Juli Dorne was born in 1996 and has been writing since primary school. Besides writing stories, her life revolves around afternoons at the piano and excessive reading of romance and fantasy novels. Since completing her master's degree in childhood studies and children's rights, she has entirely devoted herself to writing.

Play of Hearts by Juli Dorne

Sample translation by Catherine Venner

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I briefly close my eyes, allowing myself to become immersed in the world I've just stepped into. This forest is the opposite to life in Château Blanc. There, thundering silence reigns, while gentle noise hums here.

I walk along the track, beaten by my own feet over the years, and lift my skirt to stop it catching on the thorns of the still leafless bushes that sprawl over the ground. It only takes a few minutes, before I'm finally there.

The surface of the brook glistens in the morning sun as if set with diamonds. Thick grass sprouts along its banks while the soft shadows cast by the tall willow tree with its long arms lend it the appearance of being blurred. The Falins' delicate wings dart between the blades of grass and the crocus flowers as they already eagerly go about their work. Some of the small sprites notice me and excitedly fly towards me as I spread the blanket from my basket on the grass and take the apple cake from the tin.

[...]

Today's going to be a long day. I happened upon the doomed woman and it's my duty to be with her on her final journey. An unwritten rule in my family, for we do not always meet the ones designated to die before their final breath. Sometimes we dream about them, sometimes Death sends us a vision during the day and sometimes ... sometimes we're too late. Then they pass without the peace that we can give them.

I ought to be rationing my energy today so I'll be ready for the night. But after a while of watching the Falin do their arduous labour, clearing gravel from the riverbed, my heart grows heavy, and I undo my blouse and take it off with my skirt.

"I'll help you," I call as I step into the icy-cold brook. My skin instantly shrinks and I let out heavy gasps, once, twice, to help me bear the cold. One of the Falin looks over at me with concern, sticks his thin, pin-like finger in the water and the coldness dissipates. I nod my head. "Thank you."

Another Falin shows me which gravel stones need to be removed (the ones covered with too much mud) and which ones don't. We work alongside each other in silence, until bright dots appear on the edge of my vision.

In amazement, I turn my head and stop working.

A dozen Lumière, blue shimmering will-o'-the-wisps, dance through the shadows of the forest. They're usually harbingers of death and misfortune, a fact that causes me to look around apprehensively. But there's no one but the Falin and I here. Maybe one of the Falin will soon ...

The thought screeches to a halt in my head as someone steps into the clearing. Panic rushes through my body, compelling me to flee into the willow's dark shadows. I sink deeper into the water, while the Falin look at me in bewilderment.

A boy ... no, a man ... around the same age as me, strolls through the high grass, carefully placing his feet so he doesn't squash any early bloomers.

Every step he takes towards the brook makes my heart beat faster and faster and faster. It's now almost going at the rate of the Falin's wings buzzing beside me. They also conceal themselves. And yet, they shouldn't feel troubled by his presence. Maybe it's the will-o'-the-wisps that are unsettling the Falin. Usually the Lumière only come out at night when the Falin are asleep. This lad with his red woollen coat, his brown curls and soft features cannot be the reason for their agitation for the Falin can only be seen by people with magical gifts, and he appears so human, so magic-less. I wonder why he's here. In the cursed forest of the witches of Château Blanc. But maybe he's simply a tourist who's never heard any of these stories. An unusual case.

I sink deeper in to the brook until the water laps against my cheeks. The stranger has reached the bank and my heart thuds so hard that I can even feel it on the tip of my tongue.

He must not discover me here. This place is my refuge, and if someone discovers me here, then I can no longer simply hide away from everything. Not from my grand-mère, not from the looks of the townsfolk.

It's my place and I cannot share it.

[...]

"Hello," he calls. His voice, so warm and soft, sends goosebumps down my spine. In total contrast to the water, which has already lost Falin's enchantment and is now bitterly cold. "Is anybody here?"

I hold my breath, dare not move. What will he do? Will he cross the brook? How curious is he and why ...

A Falin flits past my nose, his red cheeks visibly burning with anger, and hisses. My head whips round to the decidedly bold sprite and I cast him a warning glance. Under the cover of the long willow branches, I surface a little.

"No," I whisper as strictly as possible, but the sprite only narrows his black eyes and pricks back his pointed moss-green ears. "Stop. It." I cautiously approach him as he picks up a piece of gravel and — too late. The gravel flies through the air.

"Hey!"

The stranger flinches, rubs a hand over the back of his head — the exact spot where the stone must have hit him — and turns in my direction. And I'm ... I'm standing with the water only just reaching my breast with my arm stretched out in an attempt to stop the Falin from throwing another piece of gravel and I'm blatantly visible behind the floaty willow branches.

His eyes widen when he sees me. One, two, three moments pass, in which we look at each other in silence. He on the bank of the brook, surprise written all over his beautiful face, and me with my confused heart full of fear and ... curiosity. I don't even want to know how I must appear to him. Perhaps ghost-like since all of me is light and white, while the shadows around me appear dark and threatening. I'm sure that they're practically engulfing me, making me appear even more translucent. We continue looking at each other through the curtain of branches like two people from different worlds. And somehow that's exactly what it is. He comes from life, and I from death.

He slightly bows his head as if in greeting or as a question, and instead of recoiling, like he should (and like I also should) he enters the water. What the?

I step back. The Falin, even more agitated, are flying around me and one of them is hectically tugging my hair. Presumably, he's trying to protect me but only succeeds in pulling out a few strands of hair. I barely feel the pain, my full focus is on the boy.

"Hey! No, wait." Water splashes as the boy picks up his pace. His coat and the T-shirt beneath it are sprinkled with dark droplets. He lifts his hands, while I press myself against the trunk of the willow. Just a few of the small sprites are still trying to protect me, but the situation becomes too hairy even for them as he pushes the first branches aside. He is now only a meter away, maybe less.

"You don't need to be afraid of me. I won't harm you."

Me? Afraid of him? I blink and tilt my head, which he misinterprets. He appears to think he said the right thing as now he's smiling. It's a beautiful smile.

"Hi," he slowly starts. His voice has its own unique accent, like a melody that's still trying to find its way. "I'm Arthur." He puts his hand to his chest. "And you?"

I'm still too transfixed, too tense to even say a word. He thinks I'm afraid of him! So strange. For that reason I can only stare at him in disbelief while he likewise looks me over. His brown curls gently frame his face, mismatching his prominent cheek bones. If I were to draw him, his jaw and cheeks would require quick strokes, in contrast his eyes, nose and mouth need soft lines. I'd really like to draw him.

"You understand me, don't you?" he asks, pulls off his coat and holds it out to me. "It's rather cold in this brook and..." His cheeks turn a delicate pink, while his eyes remain focused on mine. He slowly approaches, still holding his coat out to me. "Well, and you, well you're shivering ... May I?"

Now the blood flows to my cheeks, firstly out of shame because I'm standing before him in just my underwear and that would certainly make my Grand-mère furious, and also because I realise how close he is to me. Fear, as naked as my body and as ice cold as the water, races through all my cells, raging and panicking more as he tries to wrap the coat around me.

My gloves!

As fast as I can, I storm past him, soaking him with splashes in the process but he barely appears to notice it. "I'm sorry," he calls. His voice sounds desperate, as if he fears he's done something wrong. Yet it is I who made the mistake. I should have never even watched him, I should have said something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want ..." Once again he tries to come after me, water splashes and drowns his words.

"Please, stay away from me." I call as I fight my way to the river bank. My gloves — I should have never taken them off. He was too close to me, much too close, simply too close. Tears well up in my eyes, while fear and memories combine and wrap themselves tighter and tighter around my heart, squeezing it until it becomes harder to breathe than to get out of the water.

Somehow, I do manage to drag myself out of the brook, see my gloves lying safe and dry on top of my clothes and pull them over my fingers. I'm shaking all over. It was so close. The tips of our fingers only had to touch ... I press my lips together and resolutely continue to dress while my heart and breathing

calm. The touch of the rough material, which is slowly growing damp from my wet skin, does me good and brings me back to the here and now. All is well. I didn't touch him. He's alive.

Once I've done up the last button of my blouse, it's only my fingers that are still shaking, and they're now once again safely enclosed in my lace-trimmed gloves. I take a deep breath, turn around and hope that the stranger is long gone because he must have noticed how eccentric I am, but ... he's still there. He's standing in the middle of the stream, his wet coat hanging in his hand and a surprised expression still on his face.

"Are you ok?" he asks loud enough that I can still hear and understand him clearly over the distance. He doesn't move a millimetre. Better like that.

Instead of answering him, I gulp heavily and pick up the last of my things; my brush, the sketch book and charcoal pencils, the remainder of the apple cake, which is now but a few crumbs, and my blanket. I nod, so that he doesn't worry, no idea why, and still facing him, I take a step backwards.

He steps forward. I stop instantly and he follows my example as if he were my mirror image.

Why isn't he running away? Why isn't his whole body shivering? Why isn't he frightened? Even if he's a tourist and hasn't heard anything about us, about me, he has to sense it. He has to sense my curse, and it should scare him to death. His heart should be racing in panic because he has just stood face to face with death. I bring death, although I should not bring it. I killed Thomas, although I only wanted a friend. This deed clings to me like a bad omen, a dreadful premonition, the pain in an old wound in bad weather or a neck burning when you are being watched. He has to sense what I am. But ...

A thought starts to seep into my mind. No. No, no, no. That can't be right. That may not be right. I may not lose myself in this hope, not for all the riches in this world may I want to give my heart away again. I take several steps backwards.

"Are you a fairy?" he asks urgently, still without a flicker of fear in his eyes. In other circumstances, I would have laughed, but the shock and the bitter sweet hope, which is starting to weaken the cold grip about my heart, forces me to compose myself. And then I finally rip my stare away from his face and do, what I should have done immediately. I vanish into the dark forest, while the Lumière, which have flown to my side of the brook, show me the way home as harbingers of misery.

43– 47

The hour of death

Clouds cover the starry sky. The only light in this night so dark comes from the buzzing street lamps that help me find the narrow garden gate that leads to the back entrance of the one-storey house. Inside is the woman from the art stand and she only has a few more minutes to live. No time to hesitate or to think about this strange boy — Arthur — at my brook.

And so I hurry through the garden and hope that it will start to rain after I leave so that my footprints are washed away. We never go through the front door when we visit those awaiting death, ultimately we are neither a guest nor an expected visitor. Although the majority of these souls, whose fragments we take, already know their time is over, we shouldn't be seen. We are a shadow, a ghost that creeps through the house and then disappears, as if it had never been there.

Unlocked back doors and half-open windows are therefore our way into the houses of those about to die. But today, no window is open and the simple wooden door with its brass handle is securely locked. I sigh, for I don't really have much time, and even though Benoît taught me how to pick locks, I so rarely need to do it that I'm not very used to it.

But her time is running out. I feel it in my soul, how it's calling for her. Like a quiet tick, tick, tick, it vibrates through my body.

I swiftly pull a picklock from my skirt pocket and try to remember what Benoît told me the first time I had to break into a house: with intuition and a calm hand, every lock can be picked.

Despite my inexperience, it's only seconds before the door opens with a click. The wind blows and carries the noise with it, just like the sound of the breath which I let out in relief.

I put the picklock back into my skirt pocket and step into the house.

Warm, stale air and the crackling of the chimney fire greet me as I step into the kitchen. It's incredibly hot inside and more and more beads of sweat form on my forehead, the further I move into the house. Through the narrow kitchen and the living room with its comfy couch, a photowall above an open bureau and a large dining table, and on into the hall, which is just as lovingly furnished as the other rooms. Melancholy comes over me as I think how cold and artlessly our castle is furnished. No spontaneous family photos hang on our walls, no mementos of dried flowers or theatre tickets stuck to the fridge with magnets. There is no life there.

Maybe that's why I'm always so sad when I step into a colourful and lively house and leave nothing but death and grief behind.

But we may not show any mercy. We may not grieve their lives nor wish that they could continue living. For if we were to do so ... if I were to do so, it would hurt me so much that I would rather die than them.

I hear an awful cough followed by a panicked gasping for air. I straighten my back and walk towards the closed door, behind which the art seller must be. There is no longer any hesitation or melancholy as I enter the room. The woman looks dreadful. Her face is even more sunken, her eyes empty and exhausted. The sharp shapes of her emaciated body is visible through the blanket over her. But the thing that tugs my heartstrings so much is her loneliness. Nobody is with her. None of her children who so happily gaze into the camera on the family photos, nor her grandchildren, not even her husband. He already died a year ago. Estelle came for him.

Nobody but Death, who waits in the long shadows cast by the bedside lamp. And me. Maybe she wanted it that way. But my heart still weighs a ton.

"You..." she spies me immediately. Like this morning, her eyes are filled with fear and her hands grip the bed covers. "You witch. I knew you'd come for me. I knew ..." A cough shakes her fragile body. Blood lands on her chest.

Four minutes to go.

"Good evening," I greet her gently and close the door behind me. Her insults and her fear don't upset me. Not yet. Right now it is about her and her soul. "My name is Genevieve and ..."

"Go..." she hisses.

I crouch in front of her bed, sense Death behind me, how he's growing restless.

Three more minutes.

"I'm not going anywhere." I pluck off my glove, take it off and shudder briefly as the air caresses my palms. "I'll stay with you until you go."

Now the eyes of the dying woman are no longer widening out of fear of just me. She glances over my shoulder to where Death is waiting. "I'm dying," tears fill her bloodshot eyes. "I'm really dying."

I nod.

Two minutes.

"That's why I'm here." My voice is soft, full of empathy for the woman.

"In the bureau there's a note," she begins and has to pause. Her breathing is slowing down and she struggles to say the words. "Will and ... Letter, for my children. Please put it so..."

"They'll find the letter," I interrupt her.

One minute.

I raise my hand, palm facing up and look her in the eye. She should take hold of it. It is to be her last decision and she understands.

With the last of her energy she pulls her arm over the cover, I support her and slide closer to her bed. Then her fingers touch mine and I enclose her hand.

My eyes close and her soul floods into me.

Since the curse was placed on my hands, I can no longer control my magic. No matter whether the person is intended to die or not. My touch is fatal for everyone. It is as if the door, behind which we Magâme can otherwise keep our magic locked, has been wide open since this day and I can no longer shut it. My magic takes hold of souls, pulls them out of their bodies and hands them over to Death. Only a small part, a fragment of a soul, stays with me, something that did not change despite the curse. Just like now. The fragment of the woman's soul is cool like freshly mixed paint and light like the first brush stroke on white canvas. Memories flood through me. A child's laugh, strawberry cake in summer and colours. So many colours.

The fragment of her soul attaches to my magic soul, charges it with the life that I have taken from her. This part of our soul holds the magic and is the reason why I live. A gift and a burden at the same time.

A final sigh leaves her mouth as I open my eyes and a tear trickles down my face.

I let go of her hand, carefully lay it over her chest and put my gloves back on. Even though empathy and grief for her death sadden me, I feel the fragment of her soul giving me strength. My heart beats more evenly, my whole body feels recharged.

"Find your peace," I mumble and stroke her face in order to close her eyes, before turning around.

With one last glance over my shoulder, to where Death is leading the rest of her soul out of the window and the shadows once again appear grey instead of pitch black, I leave the room.

And even though it would make my Grand-mère rage if she knew what I was doing now, and Estelle would again remonstrate with me about how dreadful my empathy is, I have to do it. I dart to the

bureau, place the will and the letter on the dining table and leave the house, not quite as a ghost, not quite unseen.

You cannot say no to the last request of the dying.

P. 129– 133

Inside the house, I'm expecting the usual smell of death, but between the wood panelled walls, overfilled shoe racks and a forgotten hat in the entryway, hangs a pungent aroma, almost an attempt to disguise the obvious. Puzzled, I look around, searching for Death or any other indication why everything in this place is so strange. I cannot make out the darkest of shadows or anything else that would give me any kind of explanation. Something isn't right here. But it isn't only the people mumbling, their glances or the tense atmosphere. And as we proceed through the long hall with its walls adorned with happy family photos and step into the open-plan living room, I discover it. The piece of the puzzle that's causing the disquiet here, where it should actually be deadly silent. A flickering. Right behind the sofa between the cupboard wall and the patio door. It could easily be taken for the soft summer light playing a trick with its reflections. But it's something else. Almost as if the air in a corner was shimmering gold and hiding silhouettes that should really be visible.

I squint in an attempt to see the blurred corner more clearly. It feels like a puzzle whose solution is within reach or a lie whose truth tickles the end of your tongue.

A cough catches my attention. Estelle purses her lips and raises an eyebrow to show she won't tolerate any further distraction. *Concentrate*, she's trying to silently say to me.

Meekly, I lower my gaze and remind myself where I am. Somewhere, where a person has died.

[...]

Estelle is the first to rush into the room, pulling the trolley bearing the coffin with her. I, however, wait a while; I want to apologise to the paramedic for Estelle's behaviour and trot out some excuse, which although unlikely to save our reputation in town, may prevent it from getting worse. They should at least still bring us their dead and not be totally terrified of us. But just as I'm about to say something to him, I notice something that stops me.

The shimmer. Right behind the sofa. It's there again. Golden speckles dance in the air, moving among themselves in a similar way to the *Lumière*. Only they are not will-o'-the-wisps. Nor are they the *Falin*. It's nothing I've seen before, and yet something magical. I narrow my eyes to identify them better.

"I'll let you get on with your work," I hear the paramedic say, see him move away, feel regret that I didn't at least say a kind word to him. But all of that is pushed into the background and everything is forgotten as the glistening air changes. There, where the golden speckles were buzzing about now stands a young man.

His appearance is like a meteor shower. Unexpected, full of wishes and dreams, which dance across the night sky and are beyond reach. There is nothing I can do but stare at him in amazement.

Not because he is beautiful. Not because he appears so peculiar. And not even because he has emerged out of the flickering in the air. He's unique and for an inexplicable reason it feels like I know him.

His black hair, which hangs to his shoulders and his even blacker eyes, behind which the darkest of nights appears to hide, remind me of someone. His fine facial features interrupted by a charmingly bent nose and the almost impish smile, which somehow does not appear right on his face — *I've seen them somewhere before*. A twinkle appears in his eyes as he starts moving. He strides around the sofa, taking long, confident steps. His hands move from the pockets of his tight fitting trousers to his slim purple waistcoat that he wears over his dark shirt. His long fingers fish a card from the inside pocket of his waistcoat.

"Genevieve!" the annoyed shout from my aunt stops him. I'm still unable to react and continue staring at him. He raises his eyebrows, almost in question.

What do you want? they appear to be asking.

He bows his head, waits for a reaction from me and I feel the need to go to him. I want to find out what would happen. Whether he is only an illusion.

His smile grows broader as if he read my answer from my face. I take a step forward, ignoring the second impatient call from my aunt. My whole focus is now on him and unexpected curiosity grows in me.

Now we are just a couple a steps away from each other. He says nothing, nor do I trust myself to speak while in the back of my mind is Estelle, who I want to keep out of this situation. And yet we appear to understand each other. He holds out his hand and quite naturally, I come towards him. But then he hesitates. He knits his dark eyebrows, a question forming between them that I interpret as *Are you sure?* I reach my hand further out, somewhat more demandingly and take the card. I feel my lips forming a smile.

"Hey, Genevieve, where have you got to?" A hand roughly grabs my arm and pulls me back. As if emerging from a trance, I blink. Once. Twice. Three times. "What's wrong with you?"

I look at the young man, who is still there, and then back to Estelle. Can she not see him? I open my mouth, but he presses a finger to his and the playful smile on his lips. Psst.

Then ... He vanishes through the patio door.

159– 162

The circus had advertised its arrival and now it's here.

Tents with pointed tops, glittering lights, people on stilts, all attracting visitors. Children and adults laughing and marvelling. A place full of colour and dreams where wishes come true. So many people gathered at the entry, queuing to pass through an illuminated arch. Instantly my heart starts beating faster. Not just because of what I've already seen in the mirror. It's there again, this feeling, this being drawn to this place. A pressing need that appears to come from deep inside me.

"Impossible" I murmur to myself and have to push my heels deep into the gravel underneath me to stop myself from running off on the spot. I simply cannot explain it.

"I know, it's beautiful," Arthur whispers beside me, and when I look up, I recognised that same glow on his face which has already spread in my heart.

"Was it here the whole time?" I ask, still enchanted by the scene before our eyes.

"No. I left it about a year ago and then I couldn't find it again." Arthur closes his eyes, breathes in deeply, then looks at me. He doesn't have to say anything; I see how happy he is. How full of hope. "God, I've missed it."

I squeeze his hand and start to run with wobbly knees.

We join the queue that leads to the entrance and although there are so many people, it only takes the blink of an eye before we're heading through the arch. We don't pay anything, we're just given a full look-over by two women dressed in purple and then walk in.

A moment later we're surrounded by people. We're being pressed into each other by their laughing, and pulled apart again by calls and amazement, until I grab on to Arthur's hand so hard that I'm frightened I may hurt him. But it would be so much worse if I let go of him and was swallowed by the crowd. In panic I look around, Arthur only smiles and appears completely relaxed, while inside me pure fear is starting to rise. He lets himself ride the crowds which are pushing us back and forth, as if he were a buoy in open water, while I feel like I'm drowning. There are too many people, too many touches cutting off my air. When a couple bump into me, I fall over my feet and knock into a man on stilts. He bends over me, so low that I think he'll topple forward, but he keeps his balance. His white-painted face with violet eyebrows and a distorted grin comes so close to me that a scream forms in the back of my throat, which however doesn't come out, as he starts to laugh and walks away. I feel my ear drum vibrating and cover my ears. Again, I'm pushed by somebody, bump into people who barely notice it. I grab on to a dark vermilion red lamp. My chest is tight and the air I'm trying to breathe feels thick and viscous. I want to tell Arthur that we have to get away from here, but when I turn around ... he's no longer there.

"Arthur!" I call. I turn my head from left to right, so fast that I get dizzy. "Arthur," I call. I pull myself from the lamp and push my way through the crowd of people. Strangers' shoulders, hands and laughter all mix into a blurred scene. "Arthur, where are you?"

I stretch my head but can't see anything other than the backs of heads, tips of tents, glittering lights and the creepy man on stilts, who catches my eye and again laughs so loud that it makes my ears ring. How can I hear him? How can his laughter be louder than this mumbling roar?

Panic tightens my throat. I continue to be pushed past people, who are looking less and less like people. Tears well in my eyes. Where has my confidence, my hope gone? It feels as if all that disappeared with Arthur, and I'm now on my own with my fear. Only where is he?

I want to get away from here. I simply have to get away from here.

Somebody grips my upper arm, I protest at first until I realise that he isn't dragging me further into the crowd. He pulls me away, away from the noise, saves me. Arthur, the thought flashes through my mind. He's found me.

Suddenly, I can breathe again and it feels like I've escaped the roaring hurricane of voices and laughter.

I need a moment, before I can see clearly again. But just a second later, the next horror hits me. It's not Arthur who pulled me out of the crowd.

Horried and with a strange feeling, just like on our first meeting, I look at him. He's wearing the same purple waistcoat, the same dark trousers. And once again, his shoulder length dark hair, his

charmingly crooked nose and his haunting eyes remind me of someone. But still I cannot say who. But him, this boy standing in front of me, I would always recognise him. "You," I whisper. "You are ..."

"Rémi Leroux," he says with such a velvety voice that goosebumps instantly spread up my arms. He bows deeply, and when he comes back up he has a knowing smile on his face.

"Welcome to the Cirque du Coeur, Genevieve."