

ANNE SCHRAFF

⚠ WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT

ROSES RED AS BLOOD

PAGETURNERS®

Chapter 1

Julie Benson was a worrier. She had been one for as long as anyone could remember. “Stop fussing about every little thing,” her mother used to say. “Or you’re going to be miserable every day of your life!”

Now Julie was twenty-one. She was engaged to be married. There were no wedding plans yet. But she knew she’d be bridezilla. She would have to be careful. She didn’t want to stress out her husband-to-be, Mark Case.

“Mark,” Julie had said to her fiancé. “Please help me to relax and stay calm. I know it’s not life or death if the cake isn’t absolutely perfect.”

Mark had laughed. He was a good-natured, even-tempered man. “Hey,

babe, we could always elope,” he’d said.
“That would work for me.”

“Oh no!” Julie had cried. “I’ve dreamed of walking down the aisle in a long white dress all my life. I will look fabulous. And all of our friends and relatives will be smiling.”

“Okay,” Mark said. “But to me you’re just as beautiful in jeans and one of my T-shirts.”

Mark had gone off to a business conference in LA. Today, Julie was having lunch with a friend, Michelle Thomas. Both women worked at the same bank. Julie was leafing through a bridal magazine as she picked at her salad.

“I’ve made up my mind about one thing. I don’t want that strapless look,” Julie said. “I want to look demure.”

“Forget demure,” Michelle said. “Go for awesome. And by the way, when is Mr. Right getting back? It seems like he’s been away for ages.”

Julie wondered if Michelle might be a little bit jealous. She had seen the signs. Michelle wanted to get married too. But dating in the age of apps was hard. And her friend had terrible luck. Why wouldn't Michelle envy Julie's life? The poor thing kept dating Mr. Wrong.

"Mark is coming back tonight. We're having dinner at that new French restaurant. The place with a view of the bay," Julie said.

"Ooh la la," Michelle said. She stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork. "He's a nice guy, Julie. But did you ever wonder if he isn't too old for you? He's past thirty, isn't he?"

"Yeah, so? He's a few months past thirty. But he's perfect for me. I need somebody who's steady and mature. I'm an airhead sometimes," Julie said with a little laugh.



After work that day, Julie tracked Mark's flight on her phone. Then she drove directly

to the airport. He had been away for five days. She missed him so much.

They had been dating for just a year. He'd become such a part of her life she now felt she'd always known him. He was the first person she thought of every morning and night.

Julie pulled up to the curb. She spotted Mark immediately. It took him just a minute to stash his luggage inside the trunk. He climbed in beside her.

She turned toward him and waited for his hug. Every time they met he gave her a hug. This time was different. "Let's get going." Mark was curt.

What? Julie was surprised. "Hey, Mark, is everything okay with you?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine," he said.

Wow! What a bad mood. Julie was shocked. Something must have really gone wrong in LA. Usually, they were always

able to talk about things. But now he just stared out the window with a grim look on his face.

“You still want to have dinner at that new French restaurant?” she asked.

“Whatever,” he said.

“What’s wrong, honey? You seem so stressed,” Julie said softly.

“I’m stressed? You’re the one who’s always so uptight, not me,” Mark said. “I think you’re getting things mixed up.”

She felt a knot forming in her stomach. What was going on? Mark simply wasn’t himself. It was as if the man she loved had gone to LA and an entirely different guy had come back. What had become of the real Mark Case?

A light drizzle began to fall as she drove on. The windshield wipers slapped back and forth. The repetitive sound added to her nervousness. She glanced over at Mark. He

was impatiently tapping his fingers on his briefcase. Their eyes met. She was startled to see how sad he looked. What was going on? She'd never seen such an unhappy look on his face. His odd behavior made her nerves jangle.

“You sure everything went okay in LA?” Julie asked. “You planned so long for that seminar—”

“I told you! Everything went just fine,” Mark snapped. “And how about your week, Julie?” he asked hostilely. “Did you do anything that was especially fun?”

What a strange question. He knew she'd been working all week. What would be fun about that? “It was the same old, same old, Mark. I really missed you, though.”

Her warm remark didn't seem to soften him. The rain was coming down harder now. Blinding sheets hammered against the windshield. Gusts of wind shook the

car. Julie was so worried. She didn't see the yellow light ahead of her turn red.

“Look out!” Mark screamed.

Julie hit the brakes. The car skidded to a stop.

Chapter 2

Julie dropped Mark off at his apartment. She was a nervous wreck. The plan was for him to pick her up for dinner around eight. Did she even want to go anymore?

Maybe her parents were right. They were fond of Mark. But they didn't like the idea of their daughter getting married so young.

"You're only twenty-one," her dad had said. "You're barely out of the teen years."

"And you really don't know all that much about Mark," her mom had said. "You haven't met any of his family."

"Mom," Julie had said. "Mark is an only child. His parents died years ago."

But now she was having second thoughts

about her fiancé. Why was he behaving this way? She was wildly in love with him. They had great communication. So why didn't he just tell her what was bothering him?

Their relationship had been a dream. One day about a year ago, he'd come to Julie's window at the bank. He'd looked at her and blurted out that he'd never seen such incredible eyes. That weekend they'd gone to a music festival. Since then they'd rarely been apart.

Julie brushed her hair. "Look at me," she scolded herself. "I'm overreacting again." Couldn't she allow him to have one bad mood in a whole year? He must have had a miserable time in LA. What was she expecting? Total perfection each and every day?

Mark was usually very punctual. Tonight he was twenty minutes late. Julie still felt on edge. When he finally knocked at her door, she forced a cheerful smile. "Hi," she said. "I

was getting a little worried. Did something come up?"

Mark's face was blank. "No. Why do you ask? I'm here now, aren't I?" he said.

"Yes, you are. But you're usually right on time," Julie said. "And I was expecting you at eight."

"Come on, Julie. What's the big deal?" Mark snapped.

They drove off. "Are you feeling better?" Julie asked.

"I'm feeling fine. Why? Was I sick?" he replied. His tone was sarcastic.

"I just got the impression that the meetings in LA had been very tiring. I thought—" Julie started.

"No! They were extremely productive. In fact it was one of the best trips I ever had to LA," Mark said.

Julie stiffened. He was different. There was no denying it. How could she change

things? “Do you still feel like going to that new French restaurant?” she asked.

“Not really. Let’s go to the Chinese place. The Szechuan one,” Mark said. “Somehow that fancy French place leaves me a little cold tonight. I don’t know why.” Mark sounded bitter.

Julie’s hands tightened painfully in her lap. She hadn’t felt so tense since high school. That was when she dated a guy named Bryce Jones. She didn’t feel safe when it was time for him to take her home. She’d opted for the bus. She still remembered standing on that lonely street corner at midnight. She’d prayed for a bus to come quickly.

Mark’s continued silence made her jumpy. How could he have turned from a caring guy into this mean stranger? Had he had a nervous breakdown in LA? Or was the man beside her his evil twin?

The Chinese restaurant was beautifully decorated. There were lovely red draperies

and delicate paintings. Julie liked Chinese food. But tonight she wondered if she could eat a bite.

She studied the menu. “The fried rice and pork sounds good,” she said. “What do you think?”

“You know I hate pork. Have you forgotten that? I told you a long time ago that I can’t stand it,” Mark said. “I go away for a few days and nothing is the same when I get back!” He was nearly shouting now.

Julie could hardly believe it. Was he deliberately trying to upset her?

She tried to stay calm. “No, I don’t remember you saying you hated pork,” she said. “But that’s okay. I’ll just have some sweet and sour chicken.” She closed the menu. She wished with all her heart that the meal was over. She wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

Mark leaned back in his chair. He studied her with narrowed eyes. “Talk about

me being weird and stressed. You seem a lot different. Did something happen while I was gone?" he asked. "Even your hair is different. Did you just have it cut?"

"I just had it trimmed a little," Julie said defensively. This was absurd! He was making her feel guilty over nothing. "Are you angry or upset with me about something?"

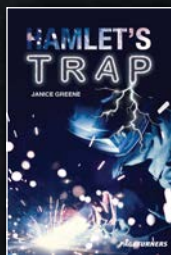
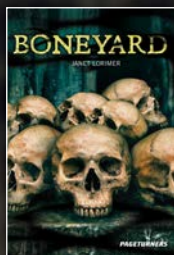
Mark's face began to soften for a moment. But then it hardened again. He looked away from her without saying another word.

PAGETURNERS® | SUSPENSE

ROSES RED AS **BLOOD**

Julie's parents object to her engagement to Mark. They really like Zach. Julie's now worried about the frightening change in her fiancé's personality. Why has he suddenly become so angry and suspicious? Looking for a shoulder to cry on, she confides in her pal Zach.

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