

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 Tinder 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 kiss. Every time they met he gave her a kiss. 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.