

Julia's best beau

He's sweet, sexy and the star of *Law & Order*. Of course **Julia Roberts** is head over heels for handsome actor **Benjamin Bratt**. Aren't we all?

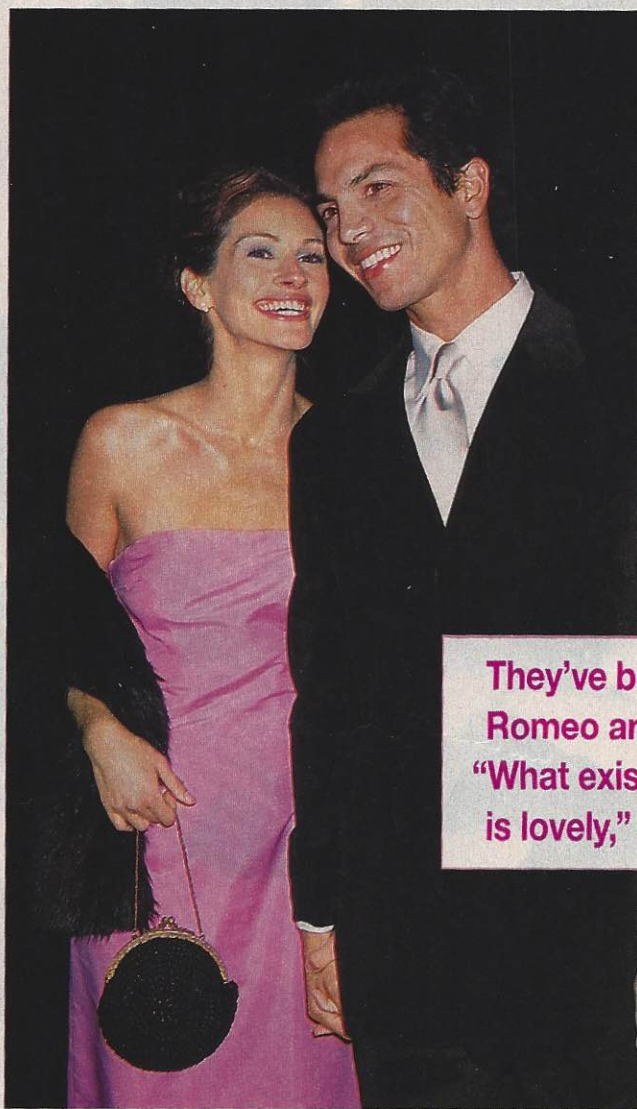
BY SHERYL BERK

Benjamin Bratt is exactly the kind of man you'd love to bring home to your mother. You know the type: He pulls out your chair, helps you with your coat, says "Please," "Thank you" and "Excuse me." And looks? "Nothing special—just tall, dark and handsome," says his *Law & Order* costar Jerry Orbach. "That about sums it up."

And although I've been warned that the topic of Bratt's love life is off-limits, I have to say to him, "Julia Roberts is one lucky lady." He smiles, a slow, seductive grin that could melt butter. "No, I'm the lucky one," he replies.

It's difficult to miss the half-dozen or so photos of Roberts that are tacked to Bratt's dressing-room bulletin board, and though he never refers to her by name, he frequently mentions "my girlfriend" in casual conversation with cast and crew and even in interviews (Roberts, in turn, calls him "my man").

"Our relationship is remarkably chaos-free, because we live our lives simply," he explains. "We concentrate on each other. And we've chosen not to pay attention to all those stories out there because invariably they're misquotes and untruths." The "untruths" include steady rumors about their romance (one tabloid has them marrying in a secret ceremony; another says they've broken up). "There are so many pseudofacts out there," he says. "And that can ultimately be



upsetting. So we focus on what's real, and what's real is what exists between the two of us."

And that is? "What that is, is lovely," he says softly.

Helping to fuel all those pesky rumors was Roberts's rare TV guest appearance on *Law & Order* May 5. She played a femme fatale involved in a sex-crime investigation who had designs on Bratt's character.

After spending a day on the set of the hit TV series, it's easy to see what attracted the *Pretty Woman* to Bratt when they met in November 1997. They've been inseparable ever since and have been photographed smooching in the Bahamas and nibbling fries (and each other) at New York City hangouts.

Friends and colleagues describe Bratt as "a regular Boy Scout" with a playful side: He loves to in-line skate, rock climb, surf, and play Marco Polo in the pool and kick the can with

**They've been dubbed
Romeo and Julia.
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his young nephews. But there's also a part of him that yearns to grow up and settle down. "I was built to be a father," he insists. "I definitely want to have a family one day." And could that

day be very soon? "Well, I turned 35, and that makes you stop and take inventory a little," he replies.

Bratt hasn't made his plans for fatherhood come true yet, but his career is clicking along steadily. About five years ago he was a virtually unknown actor, playing primarily drug dealers, hoodlums and, he says wryly, "young macho cops with a lot more brawn than brain." ▶



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With *Law & Order*, which he joined in 1995, he portrays a character of both intelligence and integrity: homicide detective Rey Curtis, “a believer in right and wrong, and justice,” he says. “Not to mention an extremely devout Catholic.”

Devout, yes, but not always chaste. Though a married man, the extremely well-dressed Rey strayed briefly last season with another woman. “How

many cops wear Armani suits?” jokes Orbach. “He’s the beefcake in our partnership.” Hot designer Wilke-Rodriguez must agree—Bratt is the poster boy for his spring collection, his bare-chested photos on billboards and in magazine ads. Then there are the countless fan Web sites that tally the precise number of times Bratt has smiled, ruffled his hair and unbuttoned his shirt on the series.

He blushes at the adulation. “No way! They count how often I undress?” he exclaims. “I suppose I

would have to consider that a compliment, but I never got into this business to become a star. I do understand, though, that in order to win the roles I want to play, there’s a level of visibility I need to have so producers and directors will take note of my work.”

He also understands the challenges of his long-playing role. “After four years you get a handle on how it goes,” he says. “It would be simple to just deliver the lines and not try to learn something new about this character every day, but that’s not the way I am. He fascinates me. There is a righteousness about Rey that he carries throughout his life, whether it has to do with his job or with his home.”

Bratt identifies with his character’s intense feelings for family. “They’re my life,” he says. “They are my sanctuary.” He was born in San Francisco, the middle of five children. His mother is a Quechua Indian from Peru, and his father is an American who made his living as a sheet-metal worker (he had three sons from a previous marriage). They divorced when Bratt was four.

The actor spent much of his early childhood on Alcatraz Island, across the bay from San Francisco, where his mother was involved in the Native American movement during the late ’60s. “It was the summer of love,” he recalls. “My mom—who was raising my brother, my three sisters and me single-handedly on welfare—saw the Indian takeover of Alcatraz on public-access television in San Francisco. So she went out on the boat and joined the Indians. I spent many of my weekends out there, running wild and not understanding or appreciating what we were a part of.”

As a teenager he went to live with his father. “I wanted to know who he was,” he says. But seven years ago Bratt’s father completely severed his relationship with his children. The conflict is painful for Bratt, and he prefers not to discuss

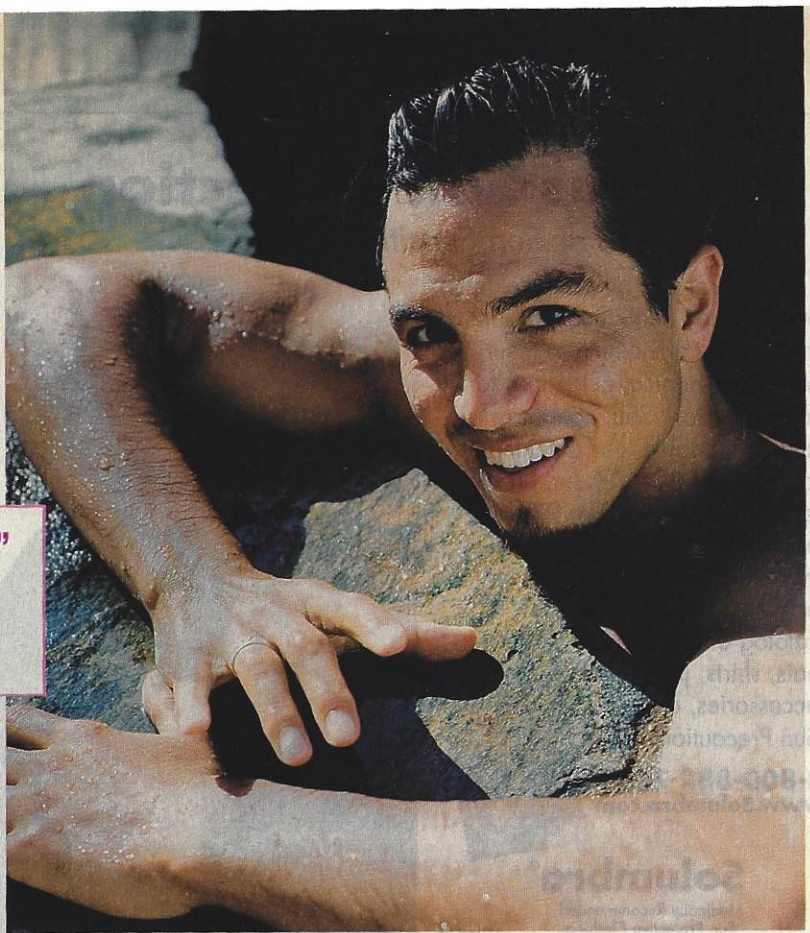
the reasons behind it. "It's a tremendous sadness to me," he says quietly.

When it comes to fractured family relationships, Bratt and Roberts have something in common: Her parents split also when she was four, and her father died when she was ten. Today she remains close to her mother and two sisters, but she has been painfully estranged from her brother, Eric, since 1993.

"I was built to be a father," Bratt insists. "I definitely want a family one day."

The similarities between the couple don't stop there. Both are athletic (he gave her a mountain bike as a birthday gift) and love quiet nights at home. "I'm not a party person," he says. "I'm not the guy who goes to all the premieres and all the hap-▶

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