

Chapter One

Five Years Earlier New York City, 2000

See, it's simple," Alvin said. "First, you meet a nice girl, and then you date for a while to make sure you share the same values. See if you two are compatible in the big, 'this is our life and we're in it together' decisions. You know, talk about which family you're going to visit on the holidays, whether you want to live in a house or an apartment, whether to get a dog or a cat, who gets to use the shower first in the morning, while there's still plenty of hot water. If you two are still pretty much in agreement, *then* you get married. Are you following me here?"

"I'm following you," Jeremy said.

Jeremy Marsh and Alvin Bernstein were standing in Jeremy's Upper West Side apartment on a cool Saturday afternoon in February. They'd been packing for hours, and boxes were strewn everywhere. Some of the boxes were already filled and had been stacked near the door, ready for the moving van; others were in various stages of completion. All in all, it looked as if a Tasmanian devil had burst through the door, had himself a party, then left once there was nothing else to be destroyed. Jeremy couldn't believe how much junk he'd accumulated over the years, a fact that his fiancée, Lexie Darnell, had been pointing out all morning. Twenty minutes ago, after throwing up her hands in frustration, Lexie had gone to have lunch with Jeremy's mother, leaving Jeremy and Alvin alone for the first time.

"So what on earth do you think you're doing?" Alvin prodded.

"Just what you said."

"No, you're not. You're messing up the order. You're going straight to the big 'I do' before you even figured out whether you two are right for each other. You barely know Lexie."

Jeremy shoved another drawer's worth of clothing into a box, wishing Alvin would change the subject. "I know her."

Alvin began shuffling through a few papers on Jeremy's desk, then shoved the stack into the same box Jeremy was loading. As Jeremy's best friend, he felt free to speak his mind.

"I'm just trying to be honest here, and you should know that I'm saying what everyone else in your family has been thinking in the past few weeks. The point is, you don't know her well enough to move down there, let alone marry her. You only spent a week with her. This isn't like you and Maria," he added, referring to Jeremy's ex. "Remember, I knew Maria, too, a whole lot better than you know Lexie, but I still never felt as if I knew her well enough to marry her."

Jeremy removed the pages and put them back on his desk, recalling that Alvin had known Maria even before he had and still remained friends with her. "So?"

"So? What if I was doing this? What if I came to you and said I met this great lady, so I'm giving up my career, abandoning my friends and family, and moving down south so I can marry her? Like that gal ... what's her name ... Rachel?"

Rachel worked at Lexie's grandmother's restaurant, and Alvin had hit on her during his short visit to Boone Creek, going so far as to invite her to New York.

"I'd say that I was happy for you."

"Puh-lease. Don't you remember what you said when I was thinking about marrying Eva?"

"I remember. But this is different."

"Oh yeah, I get it. Because you're more mature than me."

"That and the fact that Eva wasn't exactly the marrying type."

This was true, Alvin admitted. While Lexie was a small-town librarian in the rural South, someone hoping to settle down, Eva was a tattoo artist in Jersey City. She was the woman who'd done most of the tattoos on Alvin's arms, in addition to most of the piercings in Alvin's ears, making Alvin look as if he'd just been released from prison. None of which had bothered Alvin; it was the live-in boyfriend that she'd neglected to tell him about that finally doomed their relationship.

"Even Maria thinks this is crazy."

"You told her?"

"Of course I told her. We talk about everything."

"I'm glad you're so close to my ex-wife. But it's none of her business. Or yours."

"I'm just trying to talk some sense into you. This is happening too fast. You don't know Lexie."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"I'm going to keep saying it until you finally admit that you two are basically strangers."

Alvin, like Jeremy's five older brothers, had never learned how to drop a subject. The man was like a dog with a bone, Jeremy decided.

"She's not a stranger."

"No? Then what's her middle name?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Tell me Lexie's middle name."

Jeremy blinked. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing. But if you're going to marry her, don't you think you should be able to answer the question?"

Jeremy opened his mouth to answer, then realized he didn't know. Lexie had never told him, nor had he ever asked. Alvin, as if sensing that he was finally getting through to his delusional friend, pressed on.

"Okay, how about these basics? What was her major in college? Who were her friends in college? What's her favorite color? Does she like white or whole-wheat bread? What's her favorite movie or television show? Who's her favorite author? Do you even know how old she is?"

"She's in her thirties," Jeremy offered.

"In her thirties? I could have told you that."

"I'm pretty sure she's thirty-one."

"You're 'pretty sure'? Can you even hear how ridiculous you sound? You can't marry someone if you don't even know how old she is."

Jeremy opened another drawer and emptied it into another box, knowing that Alvin had a point but not wanting to admit it. Instead, he drew a long breath.

"I thought you were happy I finally found someone," he said.

"I am happy for you. But I didn't think you were actually going to move from New York and decide to marry her. I thought you were kidding about that. You know I think she's a great lady. She really is, and if you're still this serious about her in a year or two, I'll drag you down the aisle myself. You're just rushing things, and there's no reason to."

Jeremy turned toward the window; beyond the glass he saw gray, soot-covered bricks framing the functional, rectangular windows of a neighboring building. Shadowed images swept past: a lady talking on the phone; a man wrapped in a towel headed for the bathroom; another woman ironing as she watched television. In all the time he'd lived here, he'd never said so much as hello to any of them.

"She's pregnant," he finally said.

For a moment, Alvin thought he hadn't heard correctly. It was only when he saw the expression on his friend's face that he realized Jeremy wasn't kidding.

"She's pregnant?"

"It's a girl."

Alvin plopped down on the bed as if his legs had suddenly given out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Jeremy shrugged. "She asked me not to tell anyone yet. So keep it a secret, will you?"

"Yeah," Alvin said, sounding dazed. "Sure."

"And one more thing."

Alvin looked up.

Jeremy reached for his shoulder. "I'd like you to be my best man."

How had it happened?

Strolling with Lexie as she explored FAO Schwarz the next day, he still had trouble answering that question. Not the pregnancy part; that was a night he'd probably remember forever. Despite the brave front he'd put on for Alvin, it sometimes felt as if he were about to play a part in a crowd-pleasing romantic comedy, one in which anything was possible and nothing was certain until the final credits rolled.

What happened to him, after all, didn't usually happen. In fact, it almost never happened. Who travels to a small town to write an article for *Scientific American*, meets a small-town librarian,

and falls head over heels in just a few days? Who decides to leave behind a chance at morning television and life in New York City to move to Boone Creek, North Carolina, a town that was nothing more than a hiccup on the map?

So many questions these days.

Not that he was second-guessing himself about what he was about to do. In fact, as he watched Lexie sorting through stacks of GI Joes and Barbies-she wanted to surprise his many nieces and nephews with gifts in the hope of making a good impression-he felt more certain than ever about his decision. He smiled, already visualizing the kind of life he was about to settle into. Quiet dinners, romantic walks, giggling and cuddling in front of the television. Good stuff, stuff that made life worthwhile. He wasn't naïve enough to believe they'd never have an argument or struggle, but he had no doubt they would navigate those rough waters successfully, realizing in the end that they were perfectly matched. In the big picture, life would be wonderful.

But as Lexie nudged past him, lost in concentration, Jeremy found himself staring at another couple standing by a pile of stuffed animals. Actually, the couple was impossible not to notice. They were in their early thirties and sharply dressed; he had the air of an investment banker or an attorney, while his wife came across like someone who spent every afternoon at Bloomingdale's. They were loaded with half a dozen bags from half a dozen different stores. The diamond on her finger was the size of a marble-far larger than the engagement ring he'd just purchased for Lexie. As Jeremy watched, he had no doubt that they usually brought along a nanny on an outing like this, simply because they seemed completely bewildered as to what they were supposed to do.

The baby in the stroller was screaming, the kind of piercing wail that peeled wallpaper and made others in the store stop in their tracks. At exactly the same time, her older brother-maybe four or so-was screaming even more loudly and suddenly threw himself down on the floor. The parents wore the panicked, shell-shocked expressions of soldiers under fire, and it was impossible not to notice the bags under their eyes and the translucent pallor of their faces. Despite the impeccable facade, they were plainly at the end of their rope. The mother finally worked the baby free from the stroller and held the infant against her as the husband leaned toward her, patting the baby's back.

"Don't you think I'm trying to quiet her down?" she barked. "Deal with Elliot!"

Chastised, the man bent down toward his son, who was kicking and pounding the floor, throwing the mother of all temper tantrums.

"Stop that screaming right now!" the husband said sternly, shaking his finger.

Oh yeah, Jeremy thought. Like that's going to do it.

Elliot, meanwhile, was turning purple as he writhed on the floor.

By that point, even Lexie had stopped browsing and turned her attention to the couple. It was, Jeremy thought, sort of like staring at a woman who mowed her lawn in her bikini, the kind of spectacle impossible to ignore. The baby screamed, Elliot screamed, the wife screamed at the father to do something, the father screamed back that he was trying.

A crowd had gathered, ringing the happy family. The women seemed to be watching them with a mixture of thankfulness and pity: thankful that it wasn't happening to them, but knowing-most likely from experience-exactly what the young couple was going through. The men, on the other hand, seemed to want nothing more than to get as far away from the noise as possible.

Elliot banged his head on the floor and began to scream even louder.

"Let's just go!" the mother finally snapped.

"Don't you think that's what I'm trying to do?" the father barked.

"Pick him up."

"I'm trying!" he shouted in exasperation.

Elliot wanted no part of his father. As his father finally grabbed him, Elliot wiggled like an angry snake. His head flailed from side to side, and his legs never stopped moving. Beads of sweat began to form on his father's forehead, and he was grimacing with the effort. Elliot, on the other hand, seemed to be getting larger, a mini Hulk expanding with rage.

Somehow the parents were able to get moving, weighed down with shopping bags, pushing the stroller, and managing to keep hold of both children. The crowd parted as if Moses were approaching the Red Sea, and the family finally vanished from sight, the slowly fading wails the only evidence they'd ever been there.

The crowd began to disperse. Jeremy and Lexie, however, stood frozen in place.

"Those poor people," said Jeremy, suddenly wondering if this was what his life would be like in a couple of years.

"You're telling me," Lexie agreed, as if fearful of the same thing.

Jeremy continued to stare, listening as the wailing finally ceased. The family must have left the store.

"Our child will never throw a tantrum like that," Jeremy announced.

"Never." Consciously or subconsciously, Lexie had placed her hand on her belly. "That definitely wasn't normal."

"And the parents didn't seem to have any idea what they were doing," Jeremy said. "Did you see him trying to talk to his son? Like he was in the boardroom?"

"Ridiculous." Lexie nodded. "And the way they were snapping at each other? Kids can sense the tension. No wonder the parents couldn't control them."

"It's like they had no idea what to do."

"I don't think they did."

"How could they not?"

"Maybe they're just too caught up in their own lives to take enough time with their children."

Jeremy, still frozen in place, watched the last of the crowd vanish. "It definitely wasn't normal," he offered again.

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

Okay, so they were deluding themselves. Deep down, Jeremy knew it, Lexie knew it, but it was easier to pretend that they would never be confronted with a situation like the one they'd just

witnessed. Because they were going to be more prepared. More dedicated. Kinder and more patient. More loving.

And the child ... well, she would thrive in the environment he and Lexie would create. There was no doubt about that. As an infant, she'd sleep through the night; as a toddler, she would delight with her early vocabulary and above average motor skills. She would maneuver the minefields of adolescence with aplomb, stay away from drugs, and frown on R-rated movies. By the time she left home, she would be polite and well mannered, she would have received high enough grades to be accepted to Harvard, become an all-American in swimming, and still would have found enough time during the summers to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.

Jeremy clung to the fantasy until his shoulders slumped. Despite having zero experience in the parenting department, he knew it couldn't be that easy. Besides, he was getting way ahead of himself.

An hour later, they were sitting in the back of a cab, stuck in traffic, on the way to Queens. Lexie was thumbing through a recently purchased copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* as Jeremy watched the world beyond the windows. It was their last night in New York-he'd brought Lexie up to meet his family-and his parents were planning a small get-together at their home in Queens. Small, of course, was a relative term; with five brothers and their wives and nineteen nieces and nephews, the house would be packed, as it often was. Even though Jeremy was looking forward to it, he couldn't quite get his mind off the couple they'd just seen. They'd seemed so ... normal. Aside from the exhaustion, that is. He wondered whether he and Lexie would end up that way or whether they'd somehow be spared.

Maybe Alvin had been right. Partially, anyway. Though he adored Lexie-and he was sure he did, or he wouldn't have proposed-he couldn't claim to really know her. They simply hadn't had time for that, and the more he thought about it, the more he believed that it would have been nice for him and Lexie to have had a chance to be a regular couple for a while. He'd been married before, and he knew it took time to learn how to live with another person. To get used to the quirks, so to speak. Everyone had them, but until you really knew someone, they tended to be hidden. He wondered what Lexie's were. For instance, what if she slept with one of those green masks that were supposed to keep wrinkles at bay? Would he really be happy waking up and seeing that every morning?

"What are you thinking about?" Lexie asked.

"Huh?"

"I asked what you're thinking about. You have a funny expression on your face."

"It's nothing."

She stared at him. "Big nothing, or nothing-nothing?"

He turned to face her, frowning. "What's your middle name?"

Over the next few minutes, Jeremy went through the series of questions Alvin had proposed and learned the following: Her middle name was Marin; she had majored in English; her best friend in college was named Susan; purple was her favorite color; she preferred whole wheat; she liked watching *Trading Spaces*; she thought Jane Austen was fabulous; and she would, in fact, turn thirty-two on September 13.

So there.

He leaned back in his seat, satisfied, as Lexie continued to thumb through the book. She wasn't actually reading it, he figured, just skimming passages here and there in hopes of getting some sort of head start. He wondered if she had done something similar whenever she had to study in college.