



To Have and To Hold: A Novel

by Jane Green

Excerpt

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Alice takes a deep breath as she opens the wardrobe door and pulls out her dress. She lays it carefully on the bed, gathering her shoes, her veil, her stockings and garter, draping them gently next to the dress, amazed that in just a few hours' time she will be wearing all of this. In just a few hours' time she will be Joe's bride.

"Here comes the bride," she sings to herself, taking small, gliding steps down her hallway into the kitchen, smiling despite the butterflies, putting on the kettle to make herself another cup of coffee. She thinks she needs the coffee to stay awake, so badly did she sleep last night, but the adrenalin is already pumping, and she's waiting for Emily -- her maid of honour -- to arrive, someone with whom she can share the excitement.

Walking back into the bedroom, she stands for a while gazing at the dress. While not exactly what she would have chosen, she can't deny its beauty, how elegant it is, how impossibly stylish.

Alice had always thought she would have a country wedding. She dreamt, even as a little girl, of a small stone church; of walking through a white wooden gate in a soft, feminine puff of a dress, fresh flowers in her hair and a posy of hand-picked wild daisies in her hand. The groom had been unimportant: her fantasy had ended at the church door, but she knows the groom -- even in her fantasies -- would never have been as handsome, or as successful, as Joe.

At university, when she and Emily sat up late into the night discussing their knights in shining armour, Alice said she thought her ideal man would probably be an artist, or a craftsman, or a gardener. She had laughed as she said it, laughed at the unlikeliness of any lasting relationship, let alone marriage, given that her longest relationship at that time had been three weeks.

And before meeting Joe, her longest relationship had been three months. Not a good record, she had groaned to Emily when they were both planning on growing old together. "Means nothing," Emily had reassured. "Once you find him you'll be married for life. Me? I'll probably get divorced after six months." Alice had laughed, but even as she laughed she was thinking she wished she could be more like Emily, Emily who didn't want to settle down, who was quite happy flirting and flitting from one boy to the next, who claimed to have been born with a fatal allergy to commitment.

So a country wedding with a group of smiling toddlers (she had hoped that by the time she got married, if she ever got married, someone somewhere would have been able to provide the smiling toddlers) throwing down a blanket of rose petals and giggling as they walked up the aisle behind her.

She had envisaged a sea of straw hats and floral dresses, the sun beating down on her bare arms as she emerged from the church hand-in-hand with her other half.

When Joe proposed, she had told him about her dream wedding, and he had smiled at her indulgently and said it was a lovely fantasy, but they couldn't possibly get married in the country when both of them lived

in London, and anyway, didn't she agree that winter weddings were so much smarter? She didn't agree, but felt she had to, because after all, Joe was paying for it. Alice's parents didn't have a penny, and Joe was determined to have a wedding that he judged fitting for the head of the healthcare business in Mergers & Acquisitions at Godfrey Hamilton Saltz.

They would have a lovely old Bentley to drive them to the church (bye-bye Shire horses and lovely old carriage), she would wear a simple but elegant gown (so long cream puff of a dress), and a friend of his who was a jeweller would almost definitely lend her a stunning diamond tiara for her hair (see you later fresh flowers).

So Alice went through the motions of planning her wedding, but every evening would tell Joe of her decisions, and every morning would have to phone florists, dressmakers, photographers, to inform them that actually, she'd discussed it with her fiancé and the plans would be changing. Would they mind terribly, she would say, if instead of pretty mauve hydrangeas and tulips, they had dark red roses and berries, and not the dress she had designed with a tulle skirt to rival anyone in Swan Lake, but a sleek, simple sheath of a dress with long bell sleeves and a matching coat (Joe had flicked through some bridal magazines and showed Alice what would suit her), and so sorry, but actually they didn't want informal fun pictures as they had discussed, but formal family groupings that would take place during the reception.

Alice drains her coffee and steals a quick glance in the hall mirror to confirm what she already knows: deep bags under her eyes proving that last-minute nerves are not just an old wives' tale. Alice has spent the night tossing and turning, fear rising up in a wave of nausea, common sense trying to push it back down again. After all, isn't she the luckiest girl in the world? What woman would not want to marry Joe? Joe with his winning smile and easy charm. His broad shoulders and playful humour. Joe who could quite feasibly have married anyone he wanted, and he chose Alice. Alice!

Men like Joe did not usually look at women like Alice, or if they did, it was one quick, curious glance followed by instant dismissal, for the Alices of this world held nothing for men like Joe. The only child of adoring parents, he had been brought up to believe he was God (his mother's fault); to believe that every woman would fall in love with him (his mother's fault); and to believe that a woman's role in life was to do whatever Joe wanted (naturally, his mother again).

Even now, on her wedding day, Alice feels like she has to keep pinching herself. Thirty years old and used to unrequited crushes on men who never seemed to notice her, Alice didn't seriously think she'd ever find her other half. She might have had her dream wedding in mind, but in truth she was secretly convinced she would grow old with her cats, a kimono-clad spinster who would surround herself with eccentric people and end up living vicariously through her younger, prettier friends.

Alice has always thought of herself as rather plain. Everyone who knows Alice has always thought of her as rather plain. She was the shy, mousy girl in the playground who was always last to be picked for teams, and even then she knew she was only ever picked because it was a choice between her or Tracy Balcombe, and Tracy Balcombe had flat feet and B.O.

Alice was left until last because no one ever seemed to notice her. In the Lower IV she had become known as Wallpaper, a name that would be said with a snigger, although frankly it never bothered her. She quite liked the fact that she faded into the background, that she could watch her classmates and think her thoughts without anyone ever bothering her.

It only started to bother her when she discovered boys. Up until then Alice had been quite happy with her horses. Her rough book was covered with badly drawn pictures of horse heads, complete with hearts saying Alice loves Betsy, and Betsy 4 Alice, and her daydreams consisted largely of Betsy and Alice steaming ahead to victory in local gymkhanas.

But one morning the girls of Lower IV awoke to discover hormones raging through their developing bodies, and Alice found herself dreaming of Betsy less and less, and more of faded jeans and a cute smile that belonged to a boy named Joe at the boys' school round the corner.

They were on the same bus route, and Alice would stand in the newsagent's for what felt like hours, pretending to flick through magazines, waiting for Joe to arrive. She would stand behind him, staring at the back of his head, willing him to notice her, and although, once or twice, he clearly felt her gaze and turned to meet her eyes, there was not a flicker of interest and he turned away to laugh with a friend.

It was to become a familiar pattern. Throughout her twenties Alice fell head over heels for men who didn't notice her. Strong, handsome, confident men. Men who walked through life with an assurance that Alice coveted, that Alice hoped would somehow rub off on her if she got close enough, which she never managed to do.

Until she met Joe again.

She had known Joe for years. He had been a friend of Ty's -- her older brother -- at school, one of the boys on whom she had had a huge, and painful, crush. She remembered watching him chat up the prettiest girl in her school at a local disco, watched him laugh and smile with her, his face moving closer and closer as he leaned in for a kiss, before taking her hand and leading her out the door.

Rumour had it that he had gone back to her house, kissed her goodnight, then an hour later shinned up the drainpipe and stolen her virginity. It was the stuff of which legends were made, and Joe was, even then, a legend. At fourteen years old he was going out with a twenty-year-old Danish au-pair girl who lived round the corner. According to the boys in the class she was a cross between Farrah Fawcett and Jerry Hall.

Joe was responsible for a thousand broken teenaged hearts, and Alice and Emily would sit for hours and talk about how much they hated him, each of them secretly longing for him to notice them.

And then one day the doorbell rang, and Alice ran to answer it, nearly fainting when she discovered Joe standing on the doorstep. Her fifteen-year-old heart threatened to give way as a hot flush crept up her cheeks, staining them scarlet.

Joe had raised an eyebrow, amused. Not his type at all, but he liked to see the effect he had on women, it reassured him, made him feel secure, and what harm would it do to encourage her a little, it was only a bit of fun.

"Hello, Ty's sister," he smiled, his voice low and flirtatious. "You look lovely. Are you going somewhere nice?" It amused him to see her blush further, and still more to see she had quite literally lost the power of speech. Alice managed to mumble something, and stumbled away when Ty appeared. "Hey Joe," he said, grabbing his coat. "Hope you're not chatting up my sister," and they both laughed at how ridiculous that would be, as they disappeared up the path.

But Alice had been spun into a fervour. She had called Emily immediately, and Emily had come round to analyse, inspect and dissect every word. They had locked themselves in Alice's bedroom, each slumped on a beanbag, squealing with excitement as they went over and over the one sentence he had uttered, trying to understand what it meant.

"Say it again," Emily pleaded. "Tell me again what he sounded like when he said, 'You look lovely.'"

They formulated a plan of action. Worked out exactly what Alice would say to Joe when she next saw him, what tone of voice she would use, what she would wear when he took her out, because clearly, he was interested, and whether she would let him go to base one or base two on the first date.

Joe never noticed Alice again.

Fourteen years later Alice had a thriving catering business. She had finally managed to get over Joe and pass six O and two A levels, had gone to catering college, and from there to a year-long cookery course. At twenty-nine years old she had an occasional staff of three who helped her prepare and serve gourmet dinners for women too busy, or too lazy, to cook.

Alice tended to stay in the background at these dinner parties. She loved cooking the meals beforehand, but stayed in the kitchen making sure nothing got burned while the other girls served canapés and cocktails. Occasionally, should the host or hostess demand, she would come in to receive praise, reluctantly but graciously, smoothing back the loose curls that had escaped her pony-tail as she handed out business cards.

She had a small flat with a large kitchen in Kensal Rise, her two cats, Molly and Paolo, and a tiny social life thanks in part to the success of her business and in part to her natural shyness.

Her last relationship -- the three-monther -- had been with an actor called Steve, but three months of massaging the chip on his shoulder had taken its toll, and she was grateful when one of his auditions actually came to fruition and he took off to Manchester to do rep for three months. They promised to stay in touch, she would come up to visit, but she knew it was just a formality.

So there she was, in the kitchen of her dreams, in the basement of a large house in Primrose Hill. The kitchen was almost back to its pristine state, the plates stacked neatly in the dishwasher, the crystal goblets already draining next to the sink, and her casserole dishes cleaned and waiting in the boot of the car.

The guests were drinking espresso, with home-made petits fours, and Alice said goodbye to the two girls helping her out, knowing that the only thing left to do would be to wash up the coffee cups, and she could manage that perfectly well by herself.

"Oh, you must meet Alice." She heard the hostess banging down the stairs in her high heels. "She's an absolute angel, and the food's fantastic. Also," her voice dropped an octave or two, "not at all expensive compared to some of the others."

Bugger, thought Alice. Time to put my prices up. She grabbed a cloth to appear busy and practised smiling, a bright sparkly smile that would invite more business, quickly polishing the granite worktops as she heard the footsteps come into the room.

"Hello Alice," said a voice that she would have known anywhere.

"Hello Joe," she said, the smile replaced with a deep scarlet flush.

Joe walks up to greet his ushers, who all crowd round him in a conspiratorial huddle.

"Well?"

"Did you do it?"

"Was she worth it?"

"Could you resist?"

"Bloody better have been worth it, the amount we paid."

"Didn't know whether you'd have the energy."

"So come on then, Joe, what was the like? Did you succumb?"

Joe smiles beatifically and raises a hand to quiet the masses. "Boys," he says, as they wait with bated breath. "It's my wedding day. Show some respect."

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