

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Me Before You*

# Sheltering Rain

A NOVEL

Jojo  
Moyes

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*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

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# DEDICATION

*For Charles Arthur and Betty McKee*

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## PROLOGUE

*Then shall the Archbishop kiss the Queen's right hand. After which the Duke of Edinburgh shall ascend the steps of the Throne, and having taken off his coronet, shall kneel down before her Majesty, and placing his hands between the Queen's shall pronounce the words of Homage, saying:*

I, Philip, Duke of Edinburgh  
do become your liege man of life and limb,  
and of earthly worship;  
and faith and truth will I bear unto you,  
to live and die, against all manner of folks.  
So help me God.

*And arising, he shall touch the Crown upon her Majesty's head and kiss her Majesty's left cheek.*

*In like manner shall the Duke of Gloucester and the Duke of Kent severally do their homage.*

FROM THE FORM AND ORDER OF THE CORONATION SERVICE, 1953

**I**t had probably been rather rude, Joy thought afterward, to meet one's future husband on what was really meant to be Princess Elizabeth's day. Or Queen Elizabeth II, as she would more grandly be known by the end of it. Still, considering the momentousness of the occasion for both of them, it had been quite hard (for Joy at least) to work up the appropriate feeling of excitement.

It was a day portentous of rain, not divine appointment. The skies over Hong Kong harbor had been humid and iron gray, and walking slowly around the Peak with Stella clutching a folder of damp song sheets, her armpits sliding as if greased and her blouse already sticking to her back like icing, Joy had felt something less than monarchist fervor at the thought of the Brougham Scotts' coronation party.

There was her mother, already fluttering at home, a taut string of anticipation and dissatisfaction, largely due to the presence of her father, back from one of his China trips. Her father's visits always seemed to coincide with a swift downturn in Alice's moods, anchoring her hankerings for a better life, somewhere else, into something meaner and darker. "You're not wearing that," she had said, and frowned at Joy, her mouth a scarlet moue of disapproval.

Joy had eyed the door. She was desperate to meet Stella, and avoid having to walk to the Brougham Scotts' villa with her parents and had fibbed, telling them that the hosts had requested the sheet music early. Journeys with her parents, even by foot, left her feeling seasick.

"You look so plain, darling. And you're wearing your heels. You'll tower over everyone." That "darling" was a familiar sweetener to disguise the unpleasantness of what Alice was saying.

"I'll sit down."



“You can’t sit down all evening.”

“I’ll bend my knees then.”

“You should wear a wider belt. It’ll shorten you.”

“It’ll cut into my ribs.”

“I don’t know why you have to be so difficult. I’m just trying to make the best of you. It’s not as if *you* try to make yourself look nice.”

“Oh, Mummy, I don’t mind. No one else will mind. It’s not as if anyone’s going to notice me. They’ll all be listening to the princess saying her vows, or whatever it is she does.” Just let me go, she willed. It would be bad enough to have to suffer Alice’s corrosive temper for the entire party.

“Well, I mind. People will think I’ve brought you up not to care.”

What people will think was very important to Alice. Hong Kong is a goldfish bowl, she would say. There was always someone looking at you, talking about you. What a very small and boring world they must live in, Joy wanted to answer. But she didn’t, largely because it was true.

There was her father, who would doubtless drink too much, and kiss all the women on their mouths instead of their cheeks, so that they glanced around anxiously, unsure whether they had missed something. Just letting his hair down a bit, he would shout back at Alice later. What kind of a wife would deny her husband a bit of fun, after weeks of exhausting work in China (and we all knew the horrors of dealing with *the orientals*)? He hadn’t been the same since the Japanese invasion. But then they didn’t talk about that.

There were the Brougham Scotts. And the Marchants. And the Dickinsons. And the Alleynes. And all the other couples who lived in that particular class that resided just below the Peak, but not below Robinson Road (midlevels were really for the clerical classes these days), and saw one another at every drinks party at the Hong Kong Cricket Club, and met one another at the race meetings at the Happy Valley Race Course, and shared company junks on sherry-fueled boat trips around the outlying islands, and moaned about the difficulty of getting milk, and the mosquitoes, and the cost of property, and the shocking rudeness of the Chinese help. And talked about England, and how much they missed it, and about those visitors from England, and how pale and boring their lives seemed, and how *drab* England seemed to be even though the war had been over for simply ages. But most of all they talked about one another: the services men, a whole separate language of in-jokes and barrack-room humor; the merchant men, discussing and disparaging their rivals’ performances; their women, grouping and regrouping in endless bored and toxic permutations.

Worst of all there was William. William who was omnipresent at any social gathering with his receding chin and his blond hair as fragile and wispy as his strangled, high-pitched voice, placing his clammy hands on the small of her back to propel her into places she had no desire to go to. While pretending, politely, to listen, she could look down on the top of his head, and consider where it was going to thin next.

“Do you think she’s nervous?” said Stella. Her hair, glossy as wet varnish, had been pinned back in a chignon. There were no stray hairs to frizz in the damp air, unlike Joy’s, which launched a chaotic bid for freedom within minutes of being pinned back. Bei-Lin, her amah, would scowl and tut at Joy when she was pinning it, as if it were due to some deliberate unruliness on Joy’s part.

“Who?”

“The princess. I would be. Think of all those people watching.”

Stella, resplendent in a red skirt, white blouse, and blue cardigan, especially for the occasion, had displayed what Joy considered a rather unhealthy interest in the Princess

Elizabeth for the past weeks, speculating upon her choice of jewels, her outfits, the weight of her crown, even how her new husband was likely to feel jealous about her title, seeing as he didn't get to be king. Joy was beginning to suspect a rather unhumble-subjectlike sense of identification going on.

"Well, they won't all be seeing her. There'll be lots like us, who'll be listening only on the wireless." They both stepped aside to let a car pass, glancing briefly inside to see if it was anyone they knew.

"But she could still get the words wrong. I would. I'm sure I would stutter."

Joy doubted this, as Stella provided the template for just about everything ladylike. Unlike Joy, Stella was the proper height for a young lady, Stella always wore elegant clothes that her Tsim Sha Tsui tailor made up in the latest Paris fashions, Stella never tripped over her feet, or was sulky in front of company, or got tongue-tied talking to the endless line of officers who, passing through, were commandeered to the "receptions" designed to take their minds off their impending arrival at the Korean War. Joy often thought that Stella's public image might have been slightly dented if her ability to belch the entire alphabet had been as visible.

"Do you think we'll have to stay for the whole thing?"

"What, the whole ceremony?" Joy sighed, kicking at a stone. "It's bound to take absolutely hours, and they'll all get tipsy and start talking about one another. And my mother will start flirting with Duncan Alleyne and start on about how William Farquarson is related by marriage to the Jardines and has the right sort of prospects for a girl of my standing."

"I should think he's rather short for a girl of your standing." Stella also had wit.

"I've worn my high heels specially."

"Oh, come on, Joy. It's exciting. We're going to get a new Queen."

Joy shrugged.

"Why should I be excited? It's not even as if we live in the same place."

"Because she's still our Queen. She's almost the same age as us! Imagine! And it's the biggest party for simply ages. Everyone will be there."

"But they're all the same people. It's no fun going to parties if it's always the same people."

"Oh, Joy, you're determined to be miserable. There are lots of new people if you'd just talk to them."

"But I don't have anything to say. They're only interested in shopping and clothes and who's being disgraceful with whom."

"Oh, excuse us," said Stella, archly. "And what else is there?"

"I don't mean you. But you know what I mean. There must be more to life. Don't you ever want to go to America? or England? Or travel the world?"

"I've been. Lots of places." Stella's father was a naval commander. "Frankly, I think people are interested in the same things wherever you go. When we were in Singapore it was just one big blur of cocktail parties. Even Mummy was bored," said Stella. "Anyway, it's not *always* all the same people. There are officers. There'll be lots there today. And I'm sure you won't have met them all."

There were lots of officers. The Brougham Scotts' wide palazzo terrace, which overlooked Hong Kong harbor in the rare moments when the mist at the top of the Peak cleared, was a sea of whites. Inside the house, under fans whirring like huge propellers, Chinese staff also dressed in white topcoats moved silently between them in soft shoes, proffering long iced drinks on silver trays. Murmuring voices rose and fell above the music, which itself seemed muffled by the heavy, wet heat. The Union Jack pennants, strung across the ceiling points, hung like wet washing, barely moving despite the contrived breeze.

Pale and luscious, and seemingly as limp, Elvine Brougham Scott was reclining on a damask-clad chaise longue in the corner of the marbled drawing room, surrounded, as was habitual, by a corps of attentive officers. She wore a plum-colored silk dress with a sweetheart neckline and a long, gathered skirt that fell in folds around her long, pale legs. (There were no sweat marks under her arms, noted Joy, pressing her own close to her sides.) One of her shoes—trimmed with a joke ermine—had already been kicked onto the floor below, revealing Elvine’s scarlet toenails. Joy knew what her mother would say, when she saw her, while biting back her own frustration at not being Barbara Stanwyck enough to wear it herself. Scarlet Woman lipstick was as close to vampish as Alice got, although it wasn’t from lack of longing.

Joy and Stella deposited the song sheets and nodded a hello, knowing Mrs. Brougham Scott would not want to be interrupted. “How will we hear the ceremony?” said Stella, anxiously, glancing around for the wireless. “How will they know when it’s begun?”

“Don’t worry, my dear, hours to go yet,” said Duncan Alleyne, bowing as he passed, in order to check his watch. “Don’t forget they’re seven hours behind in Blighty.” Duncan Alleyne always spoke like the R.A.F. hero in a war film. The girls found it laughable, but Alice, to Joy’s disgust, seemed to think it turned her into Celia Johnson.

“Do you know she has to accept “the lively oracles of God?” said Stella, rapturously.

“What?”

“Princess Elizabeth. In the ceremony. She has to accept the “lively oracles of God.” Haven’t a clue what they are. Oh. And she has four Knights of the Garter attending her. Do you think they might possibly look after her real garters? She does have a Mistress of the Robes, after all. Betty Warner told me.”

Joy stared at the faraway look in Stella’s eyes. Why couldn’t she feel as transported by the occasion? Why did the thought of the evening ahead fill her only with dread?

“Oh. And you’ll never guess. She has her breast anointed with holy oil. Her real breast. I wish it wasn’t the wireless so we could see if the Archbishop actually touches it.”

“Hello, Joy. Gosh—you look—you look—actually, you look rather warm. Did you have to walk here?” It was William, blushing at his own approach, his hand extended limply in an unconvincing attempt at greeting. “Sorry. Didn’t mean—I mean, I walked. Too. And I’m terribly damp. Much damper than you. Look.”

Joy swept a tall pink drink from a passing tray, and gulped at it. It wasn’t just Princess Elizabeth laying down her life for her country today.

**T**here had been rather a few tall pink drinks by the time coronation hour approached. Joy, who tended to get dehydrated in the humidity, had found the tall pink drinks slipped down rather easily. They didn’t taste alcoholic, and her mother’s attention had been elsewhere—torn between the rictus Toby Jug grin of Duncan Alleyne, and her fury at her own husband’s apparent enjoyment—so it was rather a surprise to her when Princess Elizabeth’s face, fixed high on the dining room wall, suddenly multiplied, and appeared to be grinning in complicity at Joy’s attempts to walk a straight line.

Over several hours the noise of the party had gradually risen and swollen, filling the hosts’ substantial ground floor, their guests’ voices greased and elevated by the copious supply of drinks. Joy had grown progressively more withdrawn as the evening had drawn on, lacking the social skills for talking about nothing that these events seemed to require. Joy was apparently good only at losing people, not captivating them. William she had finally shaken off, telling him she was sure Mr. Amery had wanted to talk to him about business. Stella had disappeared,

swallowed into a ring of admiring naval officers; Rachel and Jeannie, the other two girls of her age, were seated in a corner with their twin Brylcreemed beaux; and so freed from the opprobrium—or even attention—of her peers, the tall pink drinks and Joy had become rather good friends.

Realizing her glass was somehow empty again, she glanced around for another houseboy. They appeared to have vanished—or maybe it was just that she was finding it hard to distinguish their bodies from anyone else's. They should have all worn Union Jack jackets, she decided, giggling to herself. Union Jackets. Or little crowns.

She was dimly aware of a gong banging, and Mr. Brougham Scott's laughing tenor attempting to summon everybody around the wireless. Joy, leaning briefly against a pillar, waited for the people in front of her to move. When they moved, she would be able to walk out onto the terrace and breathe in the breeze. But at the moment their bodies kept swaying and merging, forming an impossible wall.

"Oh, God," she muttered. "I need some air."

She had thought these words had been spoken only in her head, but a hand suddenly took her arm, and muttered, "Let's get you outside then."

Joy, to her surprise, found she had to look up. (Joy rarely had to look up—she was taller than nearly all the Chinese, and most of the men at the party.) She could just about make out two long, grave faces looming at her, swimming above two tight, white collars. A naval officer. Or two. She couldn't be quite sure. Either way, one of them had her arm and was steering her gently through the crowd toward the balcony.

"Do you want to sit down? Take deep breaths. I'll get you a glass of water." He sat her on a wicker chair and disappeared.

Joy gulped in the clean air, as if it were water. It was getting dark, and the mist had descended on the Peak, shrouding the house from the rest of Hong Kong Island. The only clues that they were not there alone were the distant, rude honking of barges traveling through the waters below, the rustle of nearby banyan trees and a faint waft of garlic and ginger, whispering through the still air.

It was this smell that suddenly did Joy in. "Oh, God," she muttered. "Oh, no . . ."

She glanced behind her, noting with relief that the last of the partygoers were disappearing into the room with the wireless. And then she leaned over the balcony and was lengthily and noisily sick.

When she finally sat up, her chest heaving, and her hair stuck sweatily to her temples, she opened her eyes to find, to her horror, the naval officer standing in front of her proffering a glass of ice water.

Joy couldn't speak. She simply looked at him in mute horror, and then buried her face, now flooded with embarrassment, in her glass. Perhaps, she prayed, suddenly, uncomfortably sober, when she looked up, he would be gone.

"Would you like a handkerchief?"

Joy kept her face down, staring grimly at her too-tall shoes. Something unmentionable was stuck in her throat, refusing to descend despite her repeated attempts to swallow.

"Look. Here. Take it."

"Please go away."

"What?"

"I said, please go away." Oh, God, if she didn't leave soon, her mother would come out to find her, and discover her. And then all hell would break loose; she could hear the chapters ahead: 1. She Was Not Fit to Be Taken Anywhere; 2. The Shame of Her Behavior, or Why Couldn't She Be More Like Stella?; 3. What Would People Think?

“Please. Please just go.”

Joy was aware that she sounded rude, but the horror of possible discovery, as well as being stuck there having to make polite conversation while there might be goodness-knows-what splashed on her blouse—on her *face*—made it seem a lesser ill.

There was a lengthy pause. The sound of loud exclamations, overlapping, rose and fell from the dining room.

“I don’t think—I think it would be better if somebody kept you company for a bit.” It wasn’t a young voice, not the excitable braying tones of most of the officers; yet it didn’t have the basso profundo of a lengthy association with power. He couldn’t be higher than officer rank.

Why doesn’t he go? thought Joy.

But he just stood there. His immaculate trousers, she noted, had a small splash of something orange on the left shin.

“Look, I’m much better now, thank you. And I really would rather you left me now. I think I might go home.” Her mother would be furious. But she could say she had felt ill. It wouldn’t be an outright lie. It was only this man who would know the truth.

“Let me escort you,” he said.

There was another buildup of noise from inside, and some high, slightly hysterical laughter. A jazz recording began and ended just as abruptly.

“Please,” he said. “Take my hand. I’ll help you up.”

“Will you please just leave me alone?” This time her voice sounded harsh, even to her own ears. There was a brief silence, and then, after a never-ending, breathless pause, she heard the sound of his footfall on the terrace as he walked slowly indoors.

Joy was too desperate to feel ashamed for long. She stood, took a long draft of the ice water, and then walked briskly, if a little shakily, toward the house. With a bit of luck, she could tell the staff and escape while they were all listening. But as she walked past the doorway of the drawing room, guests were already beginning to filter out. A teary-eyed Stella, the corners of her eyes drawn down in disappointment, was among the first.

“Oh, Joy, can you believe it?”

“What?” said Joy, dumbly, wondering how quickly she could walk past her.

“The bloody, bloody wireless. What a day for it to break. I can’t believe they’ve got only one in the house. Surely everybody’s got more than one wireless.”

“No need to fret, Stella, dear,” said Duncan Alleyne, one hand fingering his mustache, the other lingering on Stella’s shoulder just a little too long for his professed brand of paternal interest. “It won’t take long for one of the men to go and fetch one from the Marchants’ house. You’ll hardly miss a thing.”

“But we’ll miss the whole beginning. And we’ll never get to hear it again. There probably won’t even be another coronation in our lifetime. Oh, I can’t believe it.” Stella was properly crying now, oblivious to the guests around her, some of whom had evidently regarded the sacred ceremony of kings as a rather irritating interruption to a perfectly good party.

“Stella—I’ve got to go,” Joy whispered. “I’m really sorry. I’m not well.”

“But you can’t—at least stay until they’ve got the wireless.”

“I’ll call for you tomorrow.” Swiftly, seeing that her parents were still in the group that sat unnoticing around the dead wireless, Joy ran for the door. Nodding briefly to the boy who let her out, Joy was out, alone in the damp night air, with only the whining dive-bomb of the mosquitoes to keep her company, and the faintest of misgivings about the man she had left behind.

The expatriates of Hong Kong were used to living well, with an almost nightly schedule of drinks and dinners, so it was not uncommon for there to be few *gweilo* faces around first thing in the morning. But Joy, whose unfortunate accident with the pink drinks had left her feeling remarkably clearheaded on waking, found herself in the rare position of being a minority of one.

It was as if the whole of the Peak were suffering a hangover. While pairs of Chinese men and women trod softly past, some bearing heavy baskets or dragging trailers of rubbish, there was not a white person to be seen. Outside the white-painted houses, set back from the road, streams of colored bunting hung apologetically, and pictures of the smiling princess curled from windows, looking themselves exhausted from the excesses of the night before.

Padding around the teak-floored apartment, both she and Bei-Lin communicating in whispers (neither wanted to wake Alice and Graham, whose feverish, rambling arguments had stretched long into the early hours), she had decided the only thing for it was a trip to the New Territories so that she could go riding. Everyone would be spiky-headed and miserable today; and the wet heat pressed down harder than ever, magnifying hangover headaches, and ensuring that the day would be spent in a bad-tempered torpor, stretched out under fans on the soft furnishings. It was not a day to be in town. The problem Joy faced was that this was the one morning in which there was no one around to take her out of it.

She had walked to Stella's at around ten, but the curtains had been drawn, and she hadn't liked to call in. Her own father, who could usually be relied upon to drive his princess, would be unlikely to rise before midday. Not having many friends, there was no one else she felt comfortable calling upon. Seated on a wicker chair by the window, Joy toyed with the idea of taking a tram to the center of town, and then catching a train, but she had never done it alone and Bei-Lin had refused to accompany her, knowing that the mistress would be in an even fouler temper if she awoke to find the help had gone off on a "jaunt." "Oh, God save the bloody Queen," muttered Joy at her retreating back.

Not for the first time, Joy felt mutinous at the restrictions of her life, both geographical and physical. In the short time she and her mother had lived in Australia, shortly after the Japanese had invaded and the women and children had left the colony, Joy had found herself the recipient of unheard-of freedoms. They had stayed with Alice's sister, Marcelle, the doors of whose beachfront house had seemed permanently open, free for Joy to walk out, and for a variety of neighbors, all of whom seemed so relaxed and cheerful compared with those in Hong Kong, to walk in.

Alice had been relaxed there, too, had blossomed in the dry heat, where everyone spoke her language and the tall, bronzed men flirted disgracefully. There, Alice's manners had been the peak of refinement, her clothes so far beyond anything they had seen, and she could appear as she had wanted to appear: chic, cosmopolitan, exotic by way of her exile. Plus, Marcelle was younger than Alice, and enjoyably deferential in all matters of taste and style. This elevated sense of goodwill had meant that Alice had been much less "bothered" by Joy than usual, had waved her off to the beach or to the mall with barely a backward look, unlike in Hong Kong, where she was permanently preoccupied with the deficiencies of Joy's appearance, manners, and the potential dangers, in an uncivilized country, of letting her out on her own.

"I hate my life," she said out loud, letting her thoughts flood out and hang, like brooding clouds, in the air before her.

"Ma'am?"

It was Bei-Lin, standing in the doorway. "There is a gentleman to see you."

“For my mother?”

“No, ma’am. He ask for you.” She grinned, meaningfully.

“You’d better show him in.”

Frowning, Joy smoothed back her hair and stood. Company was the last thing she wanted.

The door opened, and in walked a man she had never seen before, dressed in a white, short-sleeved shirt, and cream-colored trousers. He had short, neatly cut, reddish hair, a longish, patrician face, and pale blue eyes. He was also tall, and stooped unnecessarily, seemingly out of habit, as he came through the door. Naval, she thought, abstractly. They always stooped through doorways.

“Miss Leonard.” He held a straw hat in front of him, clutching it with both hands.

Joy looked blankly. She couldn’t work out how he might know her name.

“I’m Edward Ballantyne—sorry if this is an imposition. I just wanted—I just thought I’d see how you were.”

Joy gazed at his face, and suddenly flushed with appalled recognition. She had seen that face only in duplicate before. Her hand rose unconsciously to her mouth.

“I took the liberty of asking your friend your name and address. I just wanted to make sure you got home safely. I felt rather guilty about letting you go on your own.”

“Oh, no,” said Joy, looking determinedly down at her feet. “I was fine. You’re very kind,” she added, after a pause, aware that she was being rude.

They stood for some minutes, until Joy realized uncomfortably that he wasn’t going to offer to leave. She felt so uncomfortable that her skin had begun to prickle. She had never been so embarrassed as she had been last night, and now it was repeating on her, like a too-strong taste. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone? Leave her to her private humiliation? Bei-Lin kept loitering anxiously in the doorway, but Joy studiously ignored her, damned if she was going to offer him a drink.

“Actually,” he said, after a lengthy pause, “I was wondering whether you would like to go for a walk. Or a game of tennis. Our commander has been given special permission to use some courts down by Causeway Bay.”

“No, thank you.”

“Perhaps I could ask you to show me some of the local sights? I’ve never been to Hong Kong before.”

“I’m very sorry, but I was just on my way out,” said Joy, who found she still couldn’t look at him.

There was a long pause. He was definitely staring at her. She could feel it.

“Anywhere nice?”

“What?” Joy felt her heart thumping against her chest. Why wouldn’t he go?

“You said you were going out. I just wondered . . . well, where?”

“I’m going riding.”

“Riding?” Here she looked up, hearing the eagerness in his voice. “Are there horses here?”

“Not here,” she said. “Not on the island, anyway. In the New Territories. A friend of my father’s runs a stables up there.”

“Would you mind if I tagged along? I ride a bit back home. Miss it terribly. In fact, I haven’t seen a horse for nine months.”

He said it in the wistful way that most servicemen talked about their families. His whole face, she realized, had sort of opened out, all the rather severe planes of it softening and lifting. He was, she had to admit, terrifically handsome, in a grown-up sort of way.

But he had watched her disgracing herself over the balcony.

“I’ve got a car. I could drive you. Or, just follow you, if that was more—er—convenient.”

Joy knew her mother was bound to be horrified when Bei-Lin told her that Miss Joy had disappeared in a car with a strange man, but the aftershocks probably wouldn't be that much worse than if she had stayed under her feet all day, providing a verbal punching bag for Alice's hangover. And there was something rather delicious about skimming along the quiet roads with this strange, tall, freckled man, who, rather than making her feel awkward and clumsy with words, as most officers did, simply talked and talked himself, about his horses in Ireland (curiously, he didn't have an Irish accent), the wildness of the hunting country where he lived, and, by contrast, the endless claustrophobic boredom of being confined to ship, stuck in the same tiny world, with the same people, for months and months at a time.

She had never heard a man talk as he talked, free of the endless clipped observations that characterized most of the officers she spoke to. Edward's speech was uncluttered and frank. He spoke like someone deprived of language for a long time, whole sentences coming out in gasps, like a drowning man gulping at air, and his laughter punctuated his sentences with huge, bellied guffaws. Then periodically he would stop, glance at her as if embarrassed by his own lack of reticence, and be quiet until the next thought bubbled out of him.

Joy found herself laughing, too, at first shyly, her own self gradually liberated by this strange man, so that by the time they arrived at the stables she was glowing and giggling in a way totally alien to her. After a forty-minute absence, Alice would not have recognized this daughter at all. In fact, Joy hardly recognized her, sneaking glances at the man next to her, averting her eyes coyly when he met hers, generally behaving—well—like Stella.

Mr. Foghill said he would let him ride. Joy had been secretly hoping he would, and once Edward had stood in the small yard with him, talking in reverent tones of great hunters he had known, and agreeing on the evident superiority of Irish bloodstock over English, the little widower had lost all his initial stiffness, and even recommended his own horse, a towering young chestnut with a crafty buck. He had demanded Edward take him around the manège for a couple of circuits, just to check on his seat and hands, but what he saw evidently satisfied him, for they were then riding slowly out of the gates, and up the road toward the open country.

By this stage, Joy didn't know what had come over her. She found it impossible to stop smiling, and nodding, and yet was struggling to properly hear anything he said, above this unfamiliar pounding in her ears. She was grateful to be able to hold on to the reins, and legitimately gaze at the long gray neck in front of her, stooping and rising in time with the sound of hoof fall, because she couldn't quite concentrate on anything. She felt simultaneously distant from everything around her, and acutely aware of the smallest thing. Like his hands. And his freckles. And the way he got two lines in the side of his jaw when he smiled. She didn't even notice when the mosquitoes zoomed in back on her neck, trapping themselves under her tied-back hair, and feasting on pale and tender flesh.

Best of all, he could ride. Properly ride, in that he sat tall and relaxed in the saddle, his hands moving gently backward and forward so that his reins didn't pull back against the horse's mouth, one occasionally reaching forward to stroke, or to bat an unsuspecting fly away. Joy had been to the stables only with one other man she had liked, a shy banker friend of her father's, and her fragile crush had dissipated like smoke on the wind when she saw him lurching around on the horse's back, unable to hide his fear when the horse moved into a slow trot. William she didn't even want to bring near. There was nothing to put you off a man like seeing him on a horse. It was only now, however, that Joy realized the potent appeal of a man who could ride well.

"Ever been to Scotland?" said Edward.

"What?"



“These mosquitoes. They’re like midges,” he said, slapping the back of his own neck. “Bite you anywhere.”

Joy blushed and looked down. They rode on.

The sky grew darker, and sank lower, so that Joy was unsure whether it was the damp air or sweat soaking her clothes and making stray pieces of grass and seeds stick to her skin. The atmosphere seemed to muffle everything, cloaking the sound of the horses’ hooves as if they were wrapped in flannel, enclosing them both in a warm, wet blanket. Above them, high against the backdrop of Lion Mountain, even the buzzards seemed to hang in the air like black drops of moisture, as if movement itself were too much of an effort, while the leaves that brushed against her boots left trails of water, despite the lack of rain.

If he noticed her thoughts careering chaotically, or picked up on the fact that she blushed repeatedly, found it hard to speak, or that her horse kept taking advantage of her absent-mindedness to snatch the odd mouthful of shrubbery, he said nothing. She became more composed when they cantered along a bridle path alongside a paddy field, and again when he pulled up at a roadside shack in order to get her a quarter of watermelon, but it was apparent only in that she could now gaze at him without embarrassment. It was at this point that she realized her ribbon had come out, and that her hair hung in ungroomed, sweaty strands around her shoulders. But if he noticed that, he didn’t show it, either, and merely reached out, as he handed her his handkerchief, in order to push a piece away from her face. She felt the shock of that touch electrify her skin for minutes after.

“You know, Joy, I’ve had the best time,” he said, meditatively, as they walked the horses back toward the yard. “You don’t know what it’s meant to me, being able to ride.”

Joy was conscious that at some point she was going to have to speak, but she felt that if she opened her mouth, she would say something gauche and inappropriate, or, worse, that she would somehow reveal this strange, aching longing that had sprung out of nowhere. If she said nothing, what was the worst he could think of her?

“I don’t know many girls who can ride, either. At home, the girls in my village are, shall we say, a little on the beefy side. Village girls. Not the kind I’d normally ride with, anyway. And wherever we dock, the only ones I meet want to go to cocktail parties and be witty, and to be honest I’m not much cop at all that stuff. I had a girl once—and she was a bit like you—but she . . . well. That’s all gone. And I haven’t met anyone who I could actually relax with for an absolute age.”

Oh, but Joy wanted to kiss him. I know, I know, she wanted to shout. I feel that way, too. I feel all the things you feel. But she just smiled and nodded, sneaking glances at him from under her wet hair, simultaneously berating herself for her sudden transformation into the kind of girl she had always despised. She didn’t know what she wanted in a man (it had never occurred to her that it was up to her to do the wanting), and now she found herself drawn to him not because of specific qualities, but because of a whole list of negatives: his ability not to make her feel awkward; the fact that he didn’t look like a sack of rice on a horse; his tendency not to look at her as though he wished she were someone else. Something swelled and grew in Joy; it was bigger than nausea, but just as incapacitating.

“Thank you. Anyway. Because I’ve had the best time.” He rubbed at his head, so that his hair stood up in front, and looked away from her. “And I know you didn’t really want me to come.”

Joy stared at him in horror as he said this, but now it was he who looked ahead. She couldn’t think of a way of conveying that he had misunderstood, that it was the being-sick thing that she had been running from, not him, without bringing it all back again, and she didn’t want him to remember her for that. Oh, where was Stella when she needed her? She always knew how to

talk to men. By the time she had decided that a short denial was the best response, it was somehow too late, and they were heading back toward the yard, their horses' heads stretched long and low in front of them, nodding wearily as they headed home.

Edward offered to help put the horses away, and Mr. Foghill suggested she might like to refresh herself in the ladies' rest room. On sight of her reflection, she realized that he had been being solicitous. She looked a fright. Her hair was a frizzy, wet tangle, a hair ball in a bathplug. When she tried to run her fingers through it, they halted only inches from her scalp. Her face was both sweaty with humidity and smeared with dust from the trail, and there were green spittle marks on her white shirt, where her horse had attempted to rub his head on her after she had dismounted. She rubbed furiously at her face with a wet hand towel, almost in tears at her inability to remember something as simple as a comb, or spare ribbon. Stella would never have forgotten something like that. But when she walked out, Edward merely greeted her with a broad smile, as if there were nothing remiss in her appearance. It was then that she noticed his own trousers were streaked with sweat and red dirt, clean only from the shin down, where Mr. Foghill had lent him a pair of boots.

"Your carriage awaits," he said, grinning at his own appearance. "You'll need to direct me back. I haven't a clue where we are."

Edward was a little quieter on the way home, and Joy felt her own silence more acutely. She could issue directions, but, despite the ease she felt in his company, could still not muster up anything interesting to say. It would all feel somehow shallow, when what she wanted to convey was that in the space of four short hours he had shifted her very world off its axis. In his eyes she saw other lands, green fields and hunting dogs, eccentric villagers, and a world devoid of cocktail parties. In his voice, she heard a speech free from artifice, and cleverness, continents away from the mannered, moneyed language of the Hong Kong expat. In his broad, freckled hands, she saw horses and kindnesses and something else that made her stomach constrict with longing.

"I wish I could have met you sooner," he was saying, his voice carrying away from her in the wind.

"What? What did you say?" Joy put her hand up to her ear.

"I said I wish I could have met you sooner." He slowed the car, so that she could hear better. A car full of naval officers tore past them, honking a lewd greeting. "I—I—oh, I don't know. It's just pretty galling that I leave the day after tomorrow."

A chill ran through Joy's heart. She could feel every vein turn to ice. "What? What do you mean?"

"We sail in two days. I've got one more day of shore leave, and then we've got to head for Korean waters."

Joy could not hide the expression of horror on her face. This was too cruel. To have found someone—to have found him—and for him to leave so soon.

"For how long?" Her voice, when it came out, was small and tremulous. It didn't sound like hers. Edward turned to look at her, caught something in her face, and turned back to the wheel, signaling that he was about to pull over.

"I don't think we're coming back here," he said, gazing back at her. "We do our bit with the Yanks in Korean waters, and then we're headed for New York. We'll be at sea for months." He was gazing right into her eyes, as he said this, seemingly imparting something of the impossibility of connections when one is always on the move.

Joy felt like her head was going to explode. Her hands, she noted, had begun to tremble. It was like being given the key to a prison cell, only to find it was made of rubber. She realized, with dismay, that she was going to cry.

"I can't," she said quietly, biting at her lip.

"What?" Edward had reached over, so that his hand was resting very close to her own.

"I can't just let you go. I can't let you go." She said it loudly, this time, her eyes meeting his full on. Even as she spoke, she couldn't quite believe what she was saying, the sheer inappropriateness, as a young woman of her upbringing, of her own words. But they felt unstoppable, came fully formed out of her mouth like solid, warm pebbles, falling like offerings before him.

There was a long, electrifying pause, during which she thought she might die. Then Edward took her hand. His was warm, dry.

"I didn't think you liked me," he said.

"I've never liked anyone. I mean, I never liked anyone before. I never felt comfortable with anyone before." She was gabbling now, the words tumbling unchecked, but he didn't pull away. "I find it so hard to talk to people. And there aren't people here whom I really want to talk to. Except Stella. My friend, that is. And when you came this morning I was so embarrassed about what happened last night that it was easier to get you to go away than it was to be nice to you. But when you stayed, and we went in the car, and everything, I never felt like that. I never felt like I wasn't being judged. Like I could just sit, and that person would understand."

"I thought you were hungover," he laughed. But she was too intense, too brimful of emotion to laugh with him.

"Everything you've said today I've agreed with. There's nothing you've said that I haven't felt myself. I mean obviously not the hunting and stuff, because I've never been. But all the things you said about cocktail parties and people and liking horses better sometimes and not minding if people think you're a bit odd, well, that's me, too. That's me. It's like listening to my own thoughts. So I can't. I can't let you leave. And if you're horrified by what I've said and you think I'm the most embarrassing, forward creature you've ever met, then I still don't care, because it's the only time I've felt like I was really being true to myself in my entire life."

Two heavy, salty tears had begun a slow pathway down Joy's flushed cheeks, weighted by the emotion behind what was certainly the longest speech of her adult life. She gulped, trying to keep them in check, both appalled and exhilarated by what she had done. She had laid herself prostrate before this man whom she didn't know, in a manner her mother, and probably Stella, too, would have found certifiable. And when she had told him she didn't care, it was not true. If he turned from her now, uttered some polite platitude about what a lovely day he had had and how no doubt she must be feeling exhausted, she would hold herself in until she got home and then find some way of just, well, killing herself. Because there was no way she could bear skating the trite surface of her existence when she had dipped below, and found something cool, and calming, and deep. Say you at least understand what I'm saying then, she willed. Even if you just say you understand, that will be enough for me.

There was a long, painful silence. Another car roared by, accelerating as it passed them.

"I suppose we'd better go back then," he said, placing his hand back on the wheel, and using the other to shift the stiff gear stick.

Joy's face froze, and slowly, imperceptibly, her body shrank back into the passenger seat, her spine so brittle that it was likely to crack. So she had gotten it wrong. Of course she had. Whatever had made her think that an outburst like that could win a man's respect, let alone his heart?

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her head falling toward her chest. "I'm so sorry."

Oh, God, but she was such a fool.

“For what?” said Edward, his hand reaching over and pushing back her damp curtain of hair. “I want to talk to your father.”

Joy looked at him blankly. Was he going to tell him that she was a fool?

“Look,” he said, cupping her face with his hand. It smelled of sweat. And horse. “I know you’ll probably think this is a bit sudden. But, Joy, if you’ll have me, I want to ask him about us getting married.”

**Y**ou don’t possibly think we’re going to say yes, do you?” said her mother, her face illuminated by horror and astonishment that her daughter had managed to elicit such strength of feeling from any man. (Her bad humor had been exacerbated by the fact that they had arrived back before she had had time to put her face on.) “We don’t even know him.”

She spoke as if he weren’t even in the room.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know, Mrs. Leonard,” said Edward, his long, dirty-trouser legs stretched out in front of him.

Joy eyed them with the stunned joy of new possession. She had spent the remainder of the journey in a daze, laughing out loud and half-hysterically at the madness of what they had just done. She didn’t know him! He didn’t know her! And yet they had grinned at each other with this kind of manic complicity, holding hands awkwardly, and she had willingly launched her life into his grasp. She hadn’t expected to find *anyone*. Hadn’t even thought of looking. But he seemed to know what he was doing, and he seemed much more likely to know what was right than she was. And he hadn’t been remotely fazed by the prospect of putting this insanity to her parents.

Edward took a deep breath, and began reeling off the facts. “My father is a retired judge, and he and my mother have moved to Ireland, where they breed horses. I’ve got a sister and a brother, both married, both older than I am. I’m twenty-nine years old, I’ve been in the navy for almost eight years, since I left university, and I have a private trust on top of my naval salary.”

The slight wrinkling of her mother’s nose at the mention of Ireland had been counterbalanced by the words “private trust.” But it was her father’s face Joy gazed at, desperately searching for some sign of approval.

“It’s awfully sudden. I don’t see why you can’t wait.”

“Do you think you love her?” Her father, leaning back in his chair, his gin and tonic in hand, stared at Edward. Joy flushed. It seemed almost obscene, him saying it out loud like that.

Edward looked at her for a long time, and then took her hand, making her color again. No man had ever even touched her in front of her parents.

“I don’t know if either of us could call it love yet,” he said slowly, almost addressing Joy. “But I’m not young and foolish; I’ve met lots of girls, and I know as surely as I know anything that Joy is unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

“You can say that again,” muttered her mother.

“All I can say is I think I can make her happy. If I had longer, I would be able to put your mind at rest. But, the fact is, I’ve got to sail pretty well straightaway.”

It didn’t occur to Joy to question the speed of his feelings. She was simply fiercely grateful that they appeared to match the strength of her own. Still reeling from the fact that someone had called her unique in a *good* way, it took her some minutes to realize that his hand had started to sweat.

“It’s too soon, Graham. Tell them. They don’t even know each other.”

Joy caught the brightness in her mother's eyes, the agitation behind them. She's jealous, she thought suddenly. She's jealous because she's disappointed in her own life and she can't bear the thought that someone might be about to sweep me out of mine.

Her father stared at Edward for a while longer, as if working something out. Edward held his gaze.

"Well, they do things faster these days," said Graham, motioning to Bei-Lin to fetch some more drinks. "You remember what it was like in the war, Alice."

Joy had to fight to suppress a little thrill of excitement. She squeezed Edward's hand and felt the faintest of returns.

Her father drained his glass. He appeared to be momentarily absorbed in something outside the window.

"So, say I said yes, young man. What would you plan to do about it in thirty-six hours?"

"We want to get married," said Joy, breathlessly. She felt able to speak now that it seemed they were only arguing over timing.

Her father didn't appear to hear her. He was talking to Edward.

"I'll respect your wishes, sir."

"Then I'll say you have my blessing. To get engaged."

Joy's heart leapt. And fell. "You can marry when you're next on shore leave."

There was a stunned silence in the room. Joy, fighting back disappointment, was dimly aware of the shuffling sound of Bei-Lin, behind the door, rushing off to tell the cook. Her mother was staring at her and back at her father. What would people think?

"If you're serious about each other, then it won't hurt to wait. You can buy the ring, make all the announcements, and then get married later." Her father put his glass heavily down on the lacquered table, as if signifying that judgment had been passed.

Joy turned to look at Edward, who was letting out a slow, deep breath. Please disagree, she willed. Tell him you've got to marry me now. Take me away on your big gray ship.

But Edward said nothing.

Gazing at him, Joy experienced the first thrill of disappointment in her new partner, the first microcosmic, bitter recognition that the man in whom she placed her highest hopes, her greatest trust, might not be entirely what she had hoped.

"When will that be?" she said, trying to keep the tremor from her voice. "When do you think you'll be off your ship?"

"Our next proper stop is New York," he said, almost apologetically. "But, that won't be for around nine months. It might even be a year."

Joy sat upright, and glanced around at her mother, who appeared to have relaxed. She was almost smiling, a patronizing smile, the kind of smile that said, Oh, young people—they might think they're in love, but let's see what happens six months down the line. Alice wanted to be proven right, Joy realized, feeling cold. She wanted the affirmation that true love didn't exist, that everyone ended up in marriages as miserable as her own. Well, if they thought this was going to put her off they were wrong.

"Then I'll see you in nine months," she said to the blue eyes of her new fiancé, trying to convey as much certainty into her own as she knew she felt. "Just—just write."

The door opened.

"God save the Queen!" said Bei-Lin, entering with a tray of drinks.