

Prelude

Wellington, New Zealand, 1908

Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp, age 19

ISHALL KILL MYSELF, Katherine proclaimed, as she stared out her third-floor bedroom window onto the Wellington harbor. *I've been back home for eighteen months, fifteen days, and six hours and it's intolerable. Pa keeps promising to talk about it but he never does. Mother says, 'talk to your father.' Jeanne, Chaddie, and Vera turn away saying, 'Give it up. Pa will never let you return to London. He's too afraid of the trouble you'll cause.' And my dear sweet little brother Leslie just smiles and says, 'Pa will let you go. Be patient.'*

Why did Grandmother Dyer have to die just when I needed her most? She's the only one who could convince Pa that I must live in London. And she'd be the only one who'd miss me. That is except Leslie. He'd miss our walks in the woods and my bedtime stories.

No one understands. I must become a famous author like my cousin, Elizabeth. I can never do that if I stay here. You would think after all the trouble I've caused Pa, he'd let me go.

It certainly has convinced Mother. Katherine giggled. Especially after I wrote that story about my childish affair with Edith. Oh yes, I adored Edith. Who wouldn't? She's beautiful. Talented. And she adored me. But after that week alone with her at our cottage I was bored. And then there was Maata! Exotic Maata. A real Maori princess. I never should have asked Pa's secretary to type that story but I did warn her that she might find it shocking. She giggled again. So did Pa.

She posed in the mirror. And you call yourself an independent woman. You'll never survive in London if you don't stand up for yourself now, here in this house.

She turned toward her posh bedroom. The lace curtains. Doilies on the tables. Pink bedspread. I'm so sick of this room. I'm so sick of this life, she moaned.

A horn blasted from the harbor and she hurried to the window to watch the travelers wave good-bye to their families on the dock. Oh why aren't I on that ship? Why did Pa promise me I could go and then say no?

She walked over to the door and turned the knob to go downstairs to her father and confront him. Abruptly, she returned to the window and glared at the ship slipping away.

Coward. You might act otherwise but you're such a coward.

Katherine picked up the family photo taken five years ago aboard the cargo ship Niwaru that brought her and her sisters to Queens College in London, where their parents dropped them off.

It's their fault. They're the ones who sent me to England for a proper education. Didn't they realize that after I spent three years in London studying and feeling the rhythm of that exciting city that I would never be happy anywhere else in the world?

And what's wrong with Vera and Chaddie? Why don't they want to come back with me? Pa would never have said "no" to the three of us. I tried to convince him that Leslie should go to school in London and I'd be his chaperone. No, said Mother, he's too young. Has she forgotten that I was only fourteen when she sent me away?

On the voyage to London, Katherine had been daddy's girl, sitting with him on the deck in longue-chaises gazing at the stars. Then, three years later on the return voyage, after her "scandalous behavior" on board with a charming cricket player, she spent most of the time in her cabin.

I should write to Elizabeth and ask her to convince Pa. She shook her head. No, I wrote her before and she never answered. She has no time for her peculiar, estranged cousin stranded on a remote island.

Katherine had taken classes in typing and bookkeeping at a technical school thinking her father would let her leave if she could make a living in London. But no, he said, she could never make enough to live the way she was accustomed.

He doesn't understand me. I don't care about all this frill. I'll go through my wardrobe right now and throw out all those silly evening gowns. It's Mother who insists that I never wear the same gown twice.

She swung open her wardrobe closet. But one look at the silver chiffon she wore recently at a ball given in honor of her nineteenth birthday changed her mind. She returned to pacing her room and complaining to herself.

I must get out of this house before I suffocate. I'll go to visit Julia. No I can't do that. After she heard what people were saying about the "wild girl" and my "sinful behavior," she walks on the other side of the street.

I could visit the Trowells, if they hadn't left for London. And no more cello lessons now that Mr. Trowell is gone. And his son Arnold, my Caesar. He never answered my last letter after I told him I dreamed of his embraces yet before he left for London he told me I was irresistible.

She picked up the cello that she left propped in a corner though she'd stopped playing and then put it back down again and sighed before saying, *From now on I will love only myself.*

She admired herself sideways in the full-length mirror. *I'm eating too many desserts. And look how pale I am. Oh, I really will end by killing myself.* She returned to watching the harbor from her bay window. *Yes, that's what I should do. Jump. Wave to Pa before I crumble to the ground beneath his window.*

Stop this moaning and complaining, she chided. Go talk to him.

She stomped down the staircase and burst into the library. "Pa!" She stood over him. "Pa, have you been thinking about what I said last night?"

"You mean about your passage to London?" he mumbled, without looking up.

"Yes."

"I haven't given it a thought."

She plopped down in a chair and stared at him. *Patience. Patience. Everyone tells me to be patient. All right here I am being patient. I'll just keep drumming my fingers on the desktop until he pays attention.*

At last, he looked up.

"I know I've caused you and Mother a lot of trouble since I returned from London. But don't you see how miserable I am? My life is passing by and, besides the few stories I've published, I'm completely unknown and will remain so unless I publish in London. Why did you say yes, and then change your mind? Why?"

"Your recent behavior has shown your mother and me that you are not responsible enough to be on your own. I have some control over your behavior here, but in London, who knows what trouble you will get yourself into?"

"I only get into trouble here because I'm so completely bored!"

"How can you be bored with all the parties you attend? I just saw the accounts of your dress shop expenses. Those hats you had made to your design? They were very expensive."

"Those bills aren't mine alone. It's true I get many invitations, but so do Vera and Chaddie. They are far more extravagant than I am and spend much more on clothes than me. Let me go to London, Pa, and as soon as I'm a published writer I won't need your help. I'll even pay you back when I am famous."

"Kass, I have no problem giving you money. Have I ever been anything but generous to you?"

She thought it better not to answer that question and turned her gaze upon another ship slipping out of view. *How many ships must I watch disappear from the harbor before I am a passenger?*

She turned back to him, her eyes teary. "Please let me go."

"Do you think you can manage to keep yourself off the scandal page?"

"Of course, Pa. The only talk of me in the papers will be reviews of my novels." The ship was gone. Desperate, she leapt up from the chair, and jumped in his lap.

"Pa. Please. I promise to be good. I'll even report weekly to Mr. Kay at your London bank and he can report back to you on how well I am doing."

"Stand up, Kass. You're behaving like a child." She straightened her gown and returned to her seat. Pa shuffled his papers. "I have heard from your uncle Henry. Here it is." He handed Katherine a letter. "He has suggested a lodge in London that has boarding rooms for young, unmarried women pursuing their artistic endeavors. It appears there is a room available for a well-behaved, serious young lady."

She jumped in his lap again and hugged him. "Thank you, Pa."

"Now off with you. I have work to do."

She hesitated at the door. "Pa, when will I leave for London?"

He'd returned to his paperwork and didn't answer.

KATHERINE WANTED TO LEAVE immediately but Mrs. Beauchamp didn't want anyone to think they were sending their daughter off because she had gotten into trouble. There were tea parties and a formal dance given by the Prime Minister's daughter, where Katherine performed a few mimes and sang. The *Wellington Courier's* social column described what the young guests, including Miss Beauchamp, wore and ate.

When her father finally handed her a passenger ticket for departure on July 6, 1908, he said, "I've spoken to the ship's captain and asked him to keep an eye on you as you are a young lady traveling without a chaperone."

What could be better than being alone on a ship without a chaperone? thought Katherine, but she said, "Thank you, Pa. I do so dread taking this voyage on my own. Do you think Mother could accompany me?"

Katherine knew her mother would say no. Anything to do with Katherine at this point was an irritation and an interruption from her busy social calendar.

At the embarkation dock, Mrs. Beauchamp embraced her daughter stiffly. "Please behave, Kass. I don't want to read any reports in the London papers that will embarrass our family and make me come and fetch you home."

Katherine waved to her parents until the ship made a sharp turn out of the harbor and they disappeared from her view. The sudden shift in the ocean current forced her to grip the railing and brace herself against the gale winds. As she plunged toward the open sea, she tossed back her head and shouted, "I'm free!"

