

Prelude  
Wellington, New Zealand, 1908

Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp, age 19

**I**SHALL 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 get in.'* 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 have live in London or die. 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 how much I want to be a famous author like my cousin, Elizabeth. How can I do that if I stay here? You would think after all the trouble I've caused Pa, he'd be delighted to get rid of me.*

*I've certainly convinced Mother. She giggled. Especially after I published that story about my childish romance with Edith. How I adored her. Who wouldn't? She's beautiful. Talented. And she adored me. But that week we spent at her cottage was so boring. And then I met Maata! Exotic Maata. A real Maori princess. I never should have asked Pa's secretary to type that story for me, 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 to face her posh bedroom. The lace curtains. Doilies on the tables. Pink bedspread. I'm so sick of this child's 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 turned the knob to go downstairs to confront her father. Abruptly, she returned to the window and glared at the ship slipping away.*

*Coward. You pretend otherwise but you're really a coward.*

*Katherine picked up the framed family photo taken five years ago aboard the cargo ship Niwaru. It had 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 could never live in this boring town again?*

*And what's wrong with Vera and Chaddie? Why don't they want to go back to London with me? Pa would never say "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 there?*

*On that 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" with the charming cricket player, her father told her to stay 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 cousin.*

I even suffered through those classes in typing and bookkeeping at that dreary technical school thinking he'd let me return to London if I could make a living on my own. But he said I was too spoiled and could never afford to live on a minimum wage.

*He just 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 glance at the silver chiffon she wore recently at the ball given in honor of her nineteenth birthday changed her mind. She returned to pacing her room and complaining to herself.

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

*I could visit the Trowells, if their entire family hadn't moved to London. I so much miss my cello lessons with Mr. Trowell. And his son Arnold, my dearest Caesar. He never answered my last letter telling him that I dreamed of his embraces and yet before he left for London he told me I was irresistible.*

She picked up the cello propped in a corner and then put it back down again. She sighed and declared to herself, *From now on I will love only myself.*

In the full-length mirror, she studied her profile. *I'm eating too many desserts. And look how pale I am. Oh, I really will end up killing myself.* She returned to watching the harbor from the large bay window. *Yes, that's it. Jump. Wave to Pa before I hit the ground beneath his window.*

*Stop it!* she raged. *Stop this moaning and complaining. Go downstairs and talk to him. Now!*

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

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

"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 more 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 when my novels are reviewed." The ship slipped out of view. Desperate, she leapt up from the chair and climbed onto his lap.

"Pa. Please let me go. I promise to be good. I'll even report weekly to Mr. Kay at your London bank so you can keep a watch on me."

"Stand up, Kass. You're behaving like a child." She slumped back into her seat. He shuffled his papers until he found what he was looking for and said, "Here it is. A letter from your uncle Henry." He handed it to Katherine. "He has recommended a boarding house in London that lets rooms to 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 wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Thank you, Pa."

Embarrassed by her show of affection, he said, "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 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 her impetuous daughter 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 outside 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!"

