

Untitled by Chantal Fermsae

Emily MacFarlane sighed as she glanced around at the natural disaster that had become of her bedroom. Two suitcases. That's what the pageant guidelines said she could take to Las Vegas. Two measly suitcases. How could she possibly pack for a week of public appearances, photo calls, pool parties, functions and the pageant itself in just two suitcases? She willed her luggage to morph into the Tardis, and then caught herself.

No, she had promised herself, this week was about reinvention. No more bragging about her ability to converse fluently in Klingon, arguing who made the better Dr Who, or whether Han Solo shot first. The other girls had shunned her at her last pageant for being herself. That she dared suggest they watch *Game of Thrones* instead of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* had earned her a rebuke worthy of the United Nations Security Council.

Emily, whether she cared to admit it or not, turned heads wherever she went. A talented dancer, she carried her delicate frame with the grace of a swan and the agility of a cat. Her ice blue eyes were captivating when they looked at you, and her carefree mane of wild blonde curls dared you to tame them. Ultimately though, it was Emily's carefree demeanour and easy-going charm that attracted people to her. That she was also physically beautiful was a bonus.

Emily looked at the tiara and sash on the mantle. When she had been crowned Miss Zombie Princess Nevada two years ago she had been giddy. So giddy that when her friends suggested she enter a more mainstream pageant she had excitedly said yes. But the girls at the Miss Angau County pageant had eroded the blooming confidence she had entered with. They had made it clear that she just didn't fit in.

She had been shocked to be crowned first runner up at the Miss Angau pageant, though not as shocked as some of the other girls, who were all convinced that the nerd who had performed a science experiment for the talent portion of the contest would come dead last. Whilst part of Emily was sad she didn't take out the title and prove them all wrong, she was secretly relieved that her beauty queen journey would end there.

At 25, she told her overly enthusiastic friends, the rules deemed her too old to come back next year and try again. But fate had other plans. The pageant winner, a boisterous and curvaceous redhead named Rebecca, had been dethroned following a sex tape scandal involving a pageant judge and a local Brad Pitt impersonator. So here was Emily, the first runner up, Vegas bound to compete for the title.

"Earth to Emily?" the mention of her name snapped her out of her daydream. She turned to face Ella, her best friend since, well, forever. "I've been talking to you for about 9 minutes straight and you have just stood there like a statue! Everything ok?". Emily smiled at Ella "just having a packing dilemma of epic proportions". Ella walked over to Emily and embraced her. "You will look amazing in anything you take with you Em. You could strut your stuff on that stage with no make up and dressed in a paper bag and you would still take the crown". Emily wished she had Ella's confidence. "Where's Aaron? Isn't he supposed to be driving you to Vegas?" enquired Ella.

Editor's Critique: There's a lot to like in this first page. The writing has a fun, contemporary feel and Emily comes across as a strong, sympathetic heroine—a science experiment as her pageant talent? I love it! Here are a couple of suggestions to make this first page even better.

It's tempting to tell the reader exactly what's going on from the jump, but including all the backstory too soon, using what's called info dumps, slows the story's momentum. Instead of answering all the questions at once, try to sprinkle the backstory throughout the book. Give the reader just enough to keep them turning the pages.

I also wanted to mention consistent Point of View (POV). Most of the books we publish are in third-person POV, which means we're in the character's head but we're not reading phrases like "I walked down the street." In third-person POV, it's "Emily walked down the street" or "She walked down the street." And since we're in Emily's head, all the internalizations are her thoughts. In this first page, the third paragraph switches to an omniscient narrator—Is Emily really thinking that she turns heads wherever she goes? How does Emily know her own eyes are captivating? Keeping your POVs consistent, and avoiding "head-hopping," are great ways to make sure the reader is right there with your hero or heroine, seeing the world through their eyes and getting hooked on their story.

I'm so happy I had the chance to read your first page. Best of luck with your writing!