

Chapter One – Poor writing sample (554 words)

Christie had never felt so alive. She pulled back the curtains in her cabin and looked deep into the green meadow. The morning sun cast brilliant golden streaks across the frosty grass. The fir trees were filled with noisy bird life and shook as large flocks vacated and flew into the pinky sky. Coming here had been a good idea. The cabin had been assigned to Christie a couple of months ago, when she'd arrived from Canada to work at the camp in the Blue Ridge mountains. It was rustic and quaint, and smelled of cedar wood. She loved it.

With a tune on her lips, Christie waltzed over to her wardrobe and chose an outfit for the day. A pair of blue jeans, a bright pink sweater and hiking boots would be perfect for a busy day outdoors. She smiled at her reflection and pulled a brush through her wavy brown hair. She hadn't felt this happy since John had asked her to marry him. She remembered his chiseled face, the twinkle in his eye as he knelt before her on the lawn at dusk. It was perfect. Everything was perfect...until John announced in the middle of the cake-tasting that he just wasn't ready to settle down, and probably never would be.

"I can't do this Christie," he'd said with a giant piece of hummingbird cake in his hand.

"It's okay. I'll choose the cake. It's not a big deal."

"No. I mean I can't get married. Christie, I'm sorry."

Christie had felt the panic and insecurity rise up sharply within her. She'd felt instantly dizzy.

Perhaps he was just a little nervous?

"It's just cold feet John, it will pass," she'd said shakily.

"No Christie, it's not just cold feet. I'm a loner, independent. Marriage is not for me, never will be."

There was no long explanation, hardly even a drop of emotion. The sales lady had thrown Christie an awkward look, cleared the cake and scurried from the tasting room.

And just like that, Christie's life had been turned on its head. The devastation had been so real that it was hard to believe so little time had passed. After two soul-searching months in the Blue Ridge Mountains, she felt new hope, but the longing to be married remained. She was thirty-four now and more than ready to settle down. John was an adventurous free spirit, and Christie was instantly attracted to the unpredictable spontaneity in him. But he was also a bit of a loose cannon, and she could now see that he lacked maturity and wisdom in many of the decisions he made. She had definitely been caught up in the moment, lost in the fantasy. Their break-up had most definitely been for the best.

After talking things out with her folks, Christie's mom had suggested a change of scenery to help her gain a new perspective. When Christie had found the camp online, she encouraged her to go for it. A mountain adventure to clear her mind and rejuvenate her soul was just what she needed. Time away from the routine hustle and bustle, and most importantly, time alone with God. Christie tied her hair back into a ponytail and applied a touch of make-up. She grabbed her key, locked up and strode toward the main dining area.

The Baggage Handler

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Chapter One (418 words)

The sense of dread that began with Becky's email pressed Gillian Short deep into her seat as passengers filed past her down the aisle, a line of eye-rubbing yawns and bouncing impatience.

Gillian lifted the clasp on her still-tight seat belt. Her next moves should be simple: stand up, grab her carryall from the overhead bin, and start her trip. That's what everyone else was doing with ease.

But they weren't spending five days with her sister.

A young mother leaned across the aisle as she slid her sleeping infant into the sling across her chest. "Are you okay?"

Gillian adjusted her glasses and sighed. The answer bounced around inside her head. *No. I'd rather be anywhere but here.* But the words wouldn't come out. What sort of person wasn't excited about a family wedding?

Her.

The young mother slung a bag over her shoulder and grabbed the hand of her patient toddler.

Gillian's impolite silence filled the space where an answer should have gone. She changed the subject—a tried-and-true reflex.

"You have beautiful children. Do you need any help?"

"No, but thanks for offering. Have a great day." She grabbed a tiny backpack with her free hand and took her brood down the aisle.

Gillian shook her head in amazement. *I wish I was a mom like that.* When the boys were young, just wrangling them into high chairs seemed to require military precision and a week's worth of planning. Flying them anywhere would have been out of the question. Perhaps it was even now. Sure, the boys were older, but just thinking about the havoc they could wreck brought out a cold sweat.

The ratchet in her stomach clicked tighter.

Gillian pulled out her phone. Becky hadn't texted—yet. The siren song of Facebook, a song she could never deny, called to her. A flood of wonderful achievements flew past as she thumbed through holiday photos from afar and quotes designed to inspire her to greatness, ironic hashtags and political insights into how to fix a broken world, and photos of smiling families doing life together. The best of everyone. Facebook asked what was on her mind, a question she never answered with complete truth. *Had a great flight, now here for the wedding! Gonna have an amazing time!* The self-loathing washed over her the second her finger posted this sculpted thought into life.

The cabin was empty of people and full of stale air. She was stalling. Gillian sighed hard and stood.

Here goes.

Underestimating Miss Cecilia

© 2019 by Carolyn Miller

Chapter One (439 words)

Aynsley Manor, Somerset

June 1819

IT WAS, PERHAPS, the greatest torment to love someone who barely seemed to notice one's existence. Cecilia Hatherleigh glanced across the ballroom as Edward Amherst, second son of the Earl of Rovingham, danced with her sister. Her newly married sister. Her newly married sister who even now was laughing with him in that way that suggested friendly understanding of the sort Cecy could never hope to share.

She swallowed, studying the sparkly embellishments trimming her pale green satin slippers, wishing, not for the first time, that she had been born with but a tenth of the confidence her elder sister possessed. It was not as if Caroline was that much more attractive; they shared the same fair skin, blue eyes, and chestnut curls, though Caro's curls be a shade darker. It was not as if Caro was kinder or more thoughtful. Indeed, up until recently, Cecy was fairly sure most people would have given such plaudits to herself, not the eldest daughter of Lord Aynsley, whose confidence tended to brusque abrasiveness. But Caro's newfound happiness seemed to have led to a contentment that infused her previously hard features with softness, her words and actions indicative of a kindly consideration Cecy welcomed. Gone was the flinty-eyed sister whose pronouncements used to make her squirm. Was that the effect of love, or some deeper change?

Love. She gulped. Peeked up. Watched the fair head of Ned Amherst whirl away. How could he remain blind to her? Was she that unappealing? Granted, she rarely knew what to say to gentlemen, but at least she did not complain or gossip about others like some young ladies were wont to do. Why couldn't young gentlemen assign greater importance to things like that rather than the shape of one's face or form?

Sophia Heathcote whirled by—much too young to be out, Mama had said—and cast Cecy a look that could be construed as pitying. She writhed internally again. Sophia was but Verity's age, but one would hardly think so, judging from the way Verity carried on with her hoydenish behavior, as indifferent to balls and her future as if she were a changeling child, and not—as the third daughter of the Viscount Aynsley—destined for great things on the marriage mart. Such actions had led to an accident this morning that had nearly caused the wedding to be postponed; an accident Verity still refused to speak on, but which had damaged her leg and caused her to miss tonight's proceedings. Not that Verity seemed to mind, save for the disappointment of missing out on the food.

Love and Other Mistakes

© 2019 by Jessica Kate Everingham

Chapter One (390 words)

Natalie Groves eyed the bag of gingerbread M & M's on the other side of the office meeting room and prayed for a divine intervention of Red Sea proportions.

In forty-five minutes, two goons from the head office of Potted Plants 4 Hire would walk through the door and give her fifteen minutes to convince them not to close the Charlottesville branch—the last in this half of Virginia. In forty-five seconds, she might topple out of her office chair, curl up in a ball under this wobbly table, and hide.

"Natalie." Frank, one of the salesmen, plugged Natalie's five-year-old laptop into the projector. A muscle jerked in his sandpapery cheek. Was that meant to be a smile? Hard to tell. "Those corporate idiots won't know what hit them."

Natalie manufactured a smile in return. "Thanks, Frank."

He opened the laptop lid. "You look like you're about to throw up. Just get it over and done now with before the presentation."

She took a deep breath and ignored the Mexican jumping beans in her stomach. Nothing mattered now except her presentation notes.

Suck it up, buttercup. This isn't about you.

No, it was about eight coworkers' jobs and her ability to pay Dad's medical expenses. The bills kept coming, and between her parents' increasing copay and dwindling savings, money was beyond tight. The past seven years had been a never-ending Monday morning.

Ever since Dad's doctor said, "It's cancer."

By rights, their boss, Maria, should have been giving this presentation—not the girl who answered phones. But Maria had an epic case of food poisoning, and Natalie was the one who'd written a business plan to save their office-plant hire service. It was amazing what she'd been able to piece together with half a business degree and a bucket load of desperation. And in return for all that effort, she was the one condemned to public speaking.

Frank pressed a button on the laptop. Natalie waited for the familiar whir of the fan. Nothing happened.

Uh-oh.

She peered over at him. "Did you press the right button?"

He picked up the computer and shook it. "Three times. Why do you have such an old laptop?"

Because this week's budget was down to whatever coins she could scrounge from the back of the sofa. But he didn't need to know that.

Grace in the Shadows

© 2018 by Christine Dillon

Prologue (339 words)

Late 1960's

Sydney, Australia

It was love at first sight.

And second. And third.

Each memory was a lustrous pink pearl from a necklace she now kept locked away. Out of sight but not entirely out of mind.

The first pearl was their first meeting. She pressed so close to the glass that it fogged, blurring the outline of the pink-wrapped bundle beyond. Years of pestering her mother and now the day had come. She had a baby sister.

Finally.

She hopped on the spot. As though her sister read her mind, the tiny eyes snapped open and the little rosebud mouth opened in a yawn. She liked to think that, even then, her sister was seeking her out through the glass separating them.

The second pearl was the memory of her mother as she cradled the baby close and enclosed her in love. Had Mum held her the same way? Like she was the most precious baby in the whole world? Her sister latched on and sucked. She could almost see her growing.

She hugged her arms around her waist. Did her mum remember she had an almost eleven-year-old daughter, or was she too cocooned with the baby?

She leaned forward. "Do you think I 'll ever have a baby?"

Her mother smiled. "Probably—most girls do. But don't grow up too quickly. I want my daughters with me as long as possible."

It was special to be wanted. Like being wrapped in her favourite mohair blanket on a winter's evening.

The third pearl was the first time she'd held her sister. The responsibility lay heavier than the child. Like she held a delicate china figurine.

She gazed down. Oh, the little cutie-pie. Solemn dark blue eyes stared back at her. What did they see? An older sister who already adored her? No kid would ever bully her sister. She'd be a hovering presence. A wall of protection. A hero.

The subsequent years had added more pearls. Creamy, dreamy memories. Times that became her only joys in the struggle wearing her down.