

Writing Swoon Without Spice

Annette K. Larsen · *All Swoon. No Spice.*

A cheat sheet from my workshop *A Brush of the Hand: Turning Simple Gestures into Complex Tension*. Use it to write a physical moment that carries real emotional weight, without a single thing happening behind a closed door.

START WITH A QUESTION

What's more romantic to write: the first kiss, or the moment right before it?

Tension lives in restraint, not release.

The three ingredients of a gesture that builds tension

1

A small, plausible physical detail

Something that could happen without anyone else in the room noticing: a hand brushing, fingers adjusting a hat, a hand steadying someone's back.

2

An internal reaction that reveals the stakes

Not "I felt butterflies." Something specific to *that* character: what they want but won't say or do.

3

Restraint or interruption

Something keeps the moment from going further: physically, emotionally, or because the scene gets interrupted. This is what makes readers lean in.

Told vs. experienced

STATES IT OUTRIGHT

"I was falling for him."

Does the reader's emotional work for them. Nothing left to feel out.

SHOWS THE GESTURE + RESTRAINT

His fingers brushed hers. She didn't pull away, and neither did he.

Makes the reader do the feeling. That's what makes it stick.

From the page examples from my books

Cloaked in Scarlet · Emeline & Hunter

"Then my cloak shifted where it covered my hand, and suddenly his fingers were brushing over my own where they sat at my side."

The title example. Notice how little is stated outright; the charge comes entirely from the physical detail.

To Betray a King · Bram & Faelyn · dancing in the upper hall, while the rest of the feast continues below

"We kept dancing... every movement we performed was just a little closer than was the norm, and we were a little slower to pull away. When the music went quiet... we both grew still. My hands still rested, one on his shoulder and one in his hand, while his hand still circled my waist. I stood stiff, afraid that any move I made would bring me closer to him."

Restraint as the whole engine of the moment. The tension is in not moving.

If I Could Stay · Leila & Jack

"The feel of his fingers running over my palm and weaving between my own fingers made my hormones jump up and stand at attention."

A more interior example. The physical detail is filtered entirely through sensation and reaction.

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Your turn: write the gesture 150–250 words · built around ONE small physical gesture between two characters

Pick one, or invent your own

- ☐ A hand brushing against another's while reaching for the same thing
- ☐ One character fixing the other's collar, hat, or hair out of place
- ☐ A steadying hand on someone's back or arm
- ☐ Retrieving something the other person dropped
- ☐ Sharing one umbrella, blanket, or coat in the cold
- ☐ My own: _____

The constraint

LEAVE OUT

- × Dialogue about feelings
- × A kiss
- × A declaration

MAKE SURE IT HAS

- ✓ A small, specific physical detail
- ✓ A concrete internal or sensory reaction
- ✓ Something that interrupts or restrains the moment

The tension has to live entirely in the physical detail and the internal reaction.

Draft it here

Read it back on your own, or with a writing friend

1 What was the gesture?

2 What did the restraint make you feel as a reader?

3 Where did the tension peak?

Your challenge

Find one “grand” moment in your work in progress and ask whether a small gesture could do more work than it's currently doing.

The moment:

The small gesture I could use instead:

REMEMBER

Small gesture. Internal reaction. Restraint.