

Chapter One

[City, Year]

Marianne leaned against the wall and ~~tilted her feet so her weight balanced on the outer edges of her soles. Her legs, from the knee down, were killing her to ease the weight off her aching~~ legs. Dancing always did that to her. She watched the other guests circulating about the room, ~~which was~~ bright for such a late hour. Was she the only one there who found the whole thing tedious? She'd rather have been curled up in an armchair, reading. But her stepfather had insisted she come to Maxwell Halsted's Constitution Day ball.

As if conjured by her thoughts, Halsted ~~came up behind~~ stepped to her side and ~~put~~ laid an arm around her slender shoulders. The contact made her uncomfortable. Something about the way he touched her reminded her of a cat toying with a mouse. She tried to pull away, but his ~~fingers dug into her flesh. hand tightened on her shoulder. his fingers digging in almost painfully.~~ She dared a glance up at him. He was tall and slender with wavy, silver hair and piercing blue eyes. But something cold lurked within those eyes, something that made her wish to never be in a room alone with the man.

"Come, my dear, dance with me." He ~~guided~~ drove, towed, pulled Marianne toward the center of the dance floor. It was more a command than a request, but he was very wealthy and probably quite used to people acquiescing to his every want, however unreasonable. He moved with the adept grace of an accomplished dancer, and Marianne almost enjoyed the waltz. Until his hand started a slow roam in the direction a gentleman's hands should not go.

Commented [CDP1]: information at the top sets the stage for the reader and avoids a lot of questions..

Commented [CDP2]: This is a curiously specific description. I actually read it twice to get an accurate picture in my mind. I recommend something simpler for the opening sentence.

Commented [CDP3]: Again, very specific.

Commented [CDP4]: I like this. While most girls love a party with dancing, I know right away that this girl doesn't feel like she fits into this world. She doesn't even have a girlfriend she's commiserating with.

Commented [CDP5]: Me too! I like her already. ☺

Commented [CDP6]: This tells me today is September 17, but not the year.

I recommend changing the name of the ball. Constitution Day was first a school holiday in Iowa in 1911. A small group of wealthy men wanted to promote it in 1915, but it didn't catch on strongly. In the late 1930s and '40s, there was a push for "I am an American Day," which was then formalized in the '50s. But Constitution Day wasn't made an official holiday until 2005. Given the trains and wagons in your story, I don't think this holiday will suit.

Commented [CDP7]: If she's leaning back against a wall, how can he come from behind? And how can he get an arm around her shoulders touching the wall?

Commented [CDP8]: POV: She wouldn't refer to her own shoulders.

Commented [CDP9]: Tell me how. Did her skin crawl under his touch? Did the acrid smell of his sweat sting her nostrils? Could she feel his eyes undressing her?

Commented [CDP10]: Something what? His Cheshire Cat smile?

Commented [CDP11]: You used the word *shoulder* above, so this is a good opportunity to mix it up.

Also, a small change gets rid of an -ly word.

Commented [CDP12]: This feels odd to me. I've never said, "I wish I will never be alone in a room with that person."

... [1]

Commented [CDP13]: This sounds like he led and she followed. I wouldn't expect her to go willingly.

Commented [CDP14]: Rather than telling me he's wealthy, could you show me? Does he have shiny, new

“I must admit, I considered offering to make you my mistress, but when Jacob approached me with the proposition to bail him out of debt in exchange for your hand, I could not refuse. ~~You-I will make m~~be a happy man with you as my wife.”

Halsted’s words hit home just as the dance ended. Taking advantage of the swell of people leaving the dance floor, Marianne pulled out of Halsted’s arms and insinuated slipped/slid/melted/scampered/scurried herself into the crowd, out of reach. ~~Then she set out~~She had to find Jacob. This could not be true: Halstead was at least sixty years old, and a lurch to boot!

She found her stepfather standing on the terrace, staring out at the landscape below. ~~The lines of his face looked harsher than usual, the circles under his cloudy, brown eyes darker~~She hadn’t noticed the harsh lines in his face before, but the fading light of day now revealed dark circles pulling below his brown eyes. ~~The tense hand he lifted to~~He stroked a bony, gaunt hand through his greying, blond hair ~~was thin and bony, gaunt~~.

The moment she reached him, the confrontation began. “Is what Mr. Halsted just told me true? How could you?”

“Surely you know what a beautiful girl you are, Marianne?” ~~It was more a question than a comment~~. She nodded, and he continued, “Over the last few years, many men have expressed interest, asked permission to court you.”

That was news to her. Not once had Jacob ever mentioned any suitors. Men had spoken to Jacob about courting her? Why was he just now telling her this?

He cleared his throat and looked so much like he was mustering courage. “You must have noticed the changes lately. I’ve lost quite a bit of money, and it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the lifestyle we are accustomed to.”

Commented [CDP15]: What’s Marianne’s response? We know she thinks he’s creepy, but show us what she feels here. Does her breath seize in her lungs? Does a wave of nausea wash over her? Are her aching legs suddenly energized to run?

Commented [CDP16]: This suggests she gently eased her way. I should think she’d want to get away quickly and hide. I made a list of suggestions, but you only need one. ☺

Commented [CDP17]: A small change can give the sentence an imperative feel, more urgency.

Commented [CDP18]: We don’t know what he looks like usually, so this sentence isn’t ask descriptive at it seems.

Commented [CDP19]: We can see by the ? that it’s a question. Also, you used a similar structure when Halsted made more of a command than a request.

Commented [CDP20]: How old is Marianne? Generally, in a time when men would have asked her father’s permission to court her, a girl would be nearing old maid status if she wasn’t married by 20 or 21. And there would have been no reason to wait years to marry her off. It seems more likely, her step-father would have been anxious to find her an advantageous match as soon as possible.

Commented [CDP21]: I’d have to do some research, but I think this may be a modern term.

Commented [CDP22]: Either remove this or show us what mustering courage looks like. Whispering a prayer? Closing eyes and nodding like making a decision?

This feels odd to me. I've never said, "I wish I will never be alone in a room with that person."

But I might say, "I'm thankful we're in a crowded room." Or maybe, "I'm going to be careful to stay near other people."

Rather than telling me he's wealthy, could you show me? Does he have shiny, new shoes? Does he pull her to the center of the polished marble floor?

Since you've told us this is Halsted's ball, a few words of description at the top would help bring the scene to life and set the stage. If he's the head of the town celebration committee and this ball is in the county grange, he's not terribly impressive. But if this magnificent ball takes place in his mansion on 5th Ave and everyone is wearing the latest fashions from Paris, that paints a different picture.