

Finding a Home

By Hannah Beard

There has to be more to a woman's life than this, right? More than cooking, cleaning, and being a good, submissive wife? As I stare out the window and gaze at the swaying trees and the open field in the middle of them, I watch my three little sisters playing with the flowers in our garden. My heart aches for them and their future, my current situation. I want them to be free, independent, to say or do what they want when they want to, no more asking for permission to do life's simplest things.

I want those things for myself more than anything too. I'm tired of the disappointing look from my mother and father when I try to surpass the role that was set for me, being a woman in this society. I take a breath, my hands skirting down the soft material of my white dress. A cold hand rests on my neck suddenly and I jump slightly at the surprise.

"What are you doing?" a hoarse voice asks. Shivering, Ethan's hand grips tighter on the back of my neck. I try to breathe slowly. In and out, I tell myself.

"Just thinking," I reply, my eyes weary. He's the last person I want to speak to right now. I want to rip his hand off my neck but if I show hostility, it'll be another failed attempt at getting me married. No man wants a hostile wife. I try to smile at him, but it probably comes off as a grimace. His pale complexion does not attract me, his cold eyes dark and boring; we hold eye contact.

"Thinking can be a dangerous thing for a woman," he observes me quietly, he knows my weakness. My need to show that I will not take his nonsense; the main reason my parents resent me so much. I do not follow their directions.

"Why do you say that?" I snarl, "Are you threatened by a knowledgeable woman?"

He laughs and my anger grows.

"Why, me?" He brushes his hair out of his face and sits in a nearby chair. "Not a chance."

I huff and walk out of the room, his

energy no longer choking me. I tread down the hallway faster when I hear boisterous footsteps following after me.

"Don't walk away from me!" Ethan demands, "Your superior is talking to you."

I still don't turn around but I do retort, "My superior! Ha!" and walk into a nearby room slamming the door shut behind me. A



moment passes before hands pound against the door's surface. I search for a way out, I don't fancy getting hit by him again any time soon. Over the course of the past few months we've been together, it's never been easy. I'm too stubborn and he's too impatient. But of course father says he's so generous and loving. Ha.

I search for a way out, my eyes frantically searching the room.

"Anastasia, open this door!" His voice is loud, and with the pounding, it echoes in my ears. I feel like going crazy. I run to the window and struggle with

pulling it up for a few moments. My panic lessens when I finally get it loose and summer's warm breeze blows my hair from my cold face and makes its way into my lungs and I take a second to breathe. After all though, silence doesn't last long in this house. I climb out and own the vine growing on the brick of my house and land on the soft, green grass. Picking myself up, I walk down the pathway leading away from our house. My eyes begin to water and all I know is that I don't want this life anymore.

I walk for what feels like only minutes, into the thickness of the forest until I realize how the sky has darkened. My mind has been so clouded over for so long I don't even know where I am. I stop a few steps ahead when I become aware of the sound of

men yelling and some people having other conversations. The sound of water crashing against the shore catches my attention even more. I lived closer to the ocean than I had thought. I notice an imprinted pathway in the dirt of the forest floor and follow it towards the noise.

Now that the sun has set I have come across the scene of an enormous cargo ship and men loading and unloading goods. They seem also finished and I feel like this is the

chance for adventure, the independence I crave. The power to make my own decisions. But how can I load a ship full of men with being a woman and not even knowing where this ship's destination is?

I shed my dress like a skin of oppression and slip on what feels like freedom.

I scan the scene until I see a group of boxes closer to me that are labeled clothing. Quietly, I rush towards it and open it to find men's clothes. It's perfect! I can pretend to be a man! That's the only way other wise they'd not let me on most likely.

Taking a pair of trousers, a shirt, and a hat to keep my hair in, I conceal myself behind a tree to change. I shed my dress like a skin of oppression and slip on what feels like freedom.

With my new found confidence, I stray over to the ramp to load the ship. No one's even glancing! As I walk past the men who aren't paying attention, too occupied with

handling heavy boxes, I start to recognize a fatal flaw. I'm much smaller than the rest, I'm sure to probably be targeted. How do I pass for a crew member, like the rest, when I barely have any muscle? My legs walk faster and I cast my gaze down, trying my best not to seem out of the ordinary until a hard shoulder pushes into my arm, making me stumble.

I look to see who would be so rude and a large, sweaty man glares back at me.

"Watch where you're going!" He orders with a deep, intimidating voice.

My sassiness always seems to get the best of me.

"Why don't you?" I retort, immediately regretting my response when an evil smirk takes over his face.

"You're a feisty little guy, aren't you?" He teases, but his dark eyes hold anger as he advances towards me. As I step back more and more I realize I do not have anywhere to escape, due to the side of the ship is against my back.

"You're pretty small to be talkin' to me like that," He observes. Abruptly, a shock of pain runs down my back as soon as I feel his hands push me. I cry out loudly. I search for help but there's only a crowd of men watching us now. So much for staying undetectable.

"You got new meat?" A bald man asks, his smile unappealing, his teeth rotten and

crooked. His eyebrows narrow at me.

"Yeah, this little punk thought he could run his mouth without knowing who's actually in charge," The crowd closes in more, yelling starts, chants to fight, and I'm so frightened I feel paralyzed. The man raises his fist and I close my eyes, fearing for the worst. What should I do? Try to compromise?

When I try to say something, my mouth doesn't seem to work. Maybe I'm not cut out to do this after all.

"Enough!" a voice cries, "John, that's enough!"

The man that started it all stops in his tracks. The man, John, lowers his hand back to his side and the voices grow silent. The sea of men part to reveal a man who seems in distress. His hair is just past his ears, eyes concerned and a beautiful brown, the green shirt he wears is attractively but effortlessly loose.

"What's going on here?" The stranger demands.

"Captain, this punk tried to start -"

"We all know it was you who started it, stop lying. You know what? It doesn't matter, I'll handle it. You," He points at me, "Come with me."

Still frozen to the spot, I just stare. Everyone is looking at me. Oh, god.



"You heard 'im!" a voice yells, snapping me out of my trance. I walk slowly towards him and his eyebrows are turned down, not in a negative way, more in a curious way. He leads me away from the crowd, ordering the men to get back to work first, and then opens the door to a room that looks like an office of some sort with a big map in the middle of a desk.

"You seemed quite frightened back there." The man observes. I don't say anything, just take a seat his hand points to, a silent offer.

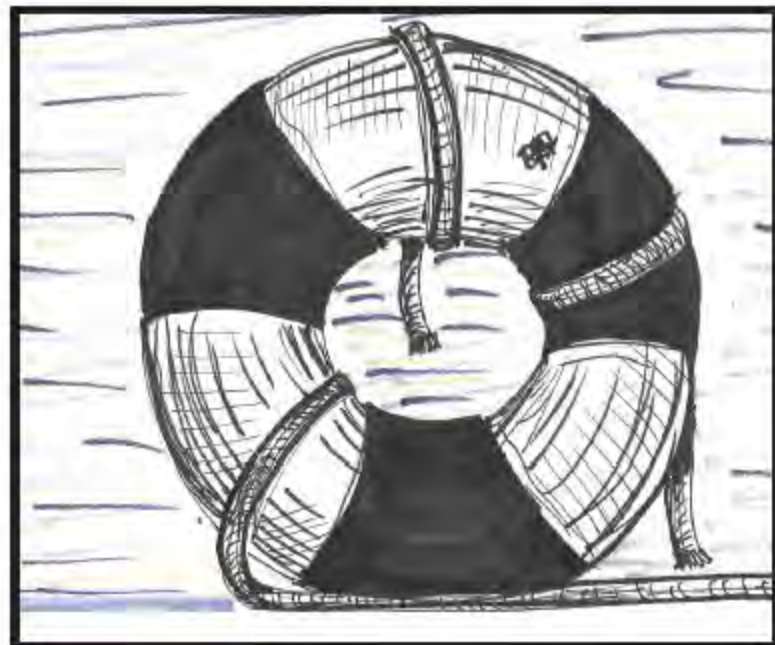
"Sorry, I should've introduced myself first," He smiles politely. "I'm Wesley."

Wesley sits behind the desk and patiently waits for me to introduce myself. What's my male name? I panic for a second.

"An-" I stop, Wesley looks expectant. "Drew. Andrew."

"Alright," He studies me for a moment and I feel like he somehow knows my true

identity. I really hope he doesn't. "And what are you plan on doing on this boat? I've never seen you before."



"I'm just looking for work, sir," I answer. Wesley nods to himself.

"What kind of work?"

"Anything, really."

"I may have a job for you. But it's after we dock in the next few days where I live."

I consider this. Wesley does seem nice and now I'm in too deep; I can't just leave the ship. At least, I feel like I can't. Especially not when I've barely had my fill of adventure.

"What would I be doing?" I ask.

"Helping me with my farm. Planting crops, hoeing the field, tending to my animals."

It seems so opposite of man of the sea to be also a man of land. I wouldn't mind a life like that, after all I will get paid for it. I'm happy a man has faith in me the way he does, even if he's oblivious of my true gender.

"I'll do it."

We shake hands on it.

Over the next few days I learn a lot from Wesley. About traveling, about work ethic; more than I could imagine. He's sweet, knowledgeable, and I've never heard a negative thing about women come out of his mouth, which is definitely a bonus.

But, I know in this form, I couldn't act on my growing feelings for him. We stay up talking for hours and we don't even notice, staring up at the sky, laughing and sharing things about life that haven't been easy.

I've never felt closer to somebody in such a short time. He's a great friend, but I could definitely see wanting more. I've never thought of gays and what they struggle with but I know this is the closest I could get to knowing that struggle. I have to stop thinking about men. I don't need one for my life to be complete. I know I won't be able to keep this disguise forever but if I can do it long enough to save money so I can get on my own two feet then I'll get through it.

We dock a day later, at a city's port. It's buzzing with busy people and here, there are more ships that I could've imagined. The crew members gather the goods they previously loaded and unleash the ramp to connect to the rest of the world. I visit Wesley's study and see him packing a few things in his bag. He turns to look at me and when he does my breath catches. The sun has illuminated his eyes and his hair is swept

to the side in a way that is far more attractive than before. His smile is bright and happy.

"Ready to go?" Wesley asks.

"Yes, sir," I say. His eyes question me.

"Where's your belongings?" He asks.

Oh, that

"I don't have any." I look down at my feet. I don't hear anything for a moment until there's a pair of feet in from of mine. I look up..

"You will eventually," Wesley assures. I smile at the comment.

As we ride in our carriage on the countryside of London, I see how beautiful my surroundings are. Better than home, I think to myself. Although I do miss my sisters and they're probably in a panic of my disappearance, I can't seem to want to go back. Of course I'll eventually write them a letter to assure them all is well but that might not be until I'm settled in Wesley's estate.

Our carriage goes over a bump and it startles me back out of my deep thinking. Wesley seems to notice this.

"Are you okay?" He asks, his face showing concern. I'm glad I have someone who cares for my well being.

I nod and go back to looking out the window, feeling the soft breeze upon my face. I feel at peace for a moment.



When we arrive, we arrive at a quaint, but beautiful cottage surrounded by a garden. Around the house is tons of acres, plants already shooting up out of the dirt. Some patches need work though and I guess that's why he wants me here. A stone pathway leads to the wooden house. Jumping out of the carriage, I wait for Wesley to lead me after he gathers his bag.

"I hope you'll like it here," He says, and I beam at him. Me too, I think.

I settle in that night in a room with a small bed, dresser, and a desk with a chair pushed under it. For once in a long time I take my hat off and look at myself in the mirror mounted on the wall. My hair is long and tangly from being unwashed and put up. I grimace at it and I feel the need for a bath. I put my hair back up and walk out into the hallway, looking for a bathroom. Once I find it, I shut the door and lock it; just in case.

I bathe and feel totally renewed. I didn't know a bath could change me so much but it does. Feeling refreshed, and after combing my hair, I dress myself in the clothes I find in the closet in my room and lay down.

Wesley is downstairs, maybe writing. I'm not sure. I'd go down and see for myself but I'm not sure I'd be able to move, a good amount of fatigue setting in.

I close my eyes and rest for the night. In the morning, Wesley puts me to work. I start out planting seeds, hoeing the dirt, and watering his current crops. My back aches

terribly, but I refuse to complain. This is what I agreed to. I have to prove to myself that being a woman has nothing to do with my work ethic. I work like a man, I can work better than one too.

Moments, days, months pass and Wesley and I have grown closer than ever. He's a companion in this lonely life of mine and he's shown me and given me more opportunities that I even thought imaginable. Plus, he thinks I'm the best at getting things to grow, which kind of feels like a compliment. I hope.

One day I'm bent over hoeing, scraping into the earth. It's a hot summer day, and sweat trickles down my forehead and onto my neck. My face burns with the sun's rays. Wesley is nearby, picking his fruits he's grown. I go to wipe my forehead but in the process, knock my hat off, that has been keeping my identity a secret.

It falls to the ground and I scramble for it, trying to pull my hair up and force it back in but the damage seems to be done when I see Wesley's stare. I look down, ashamed, for once in what feels like forever. I don't like it. I guess all good things come to an end.

"Wesley, I-"

"Don't." He orders, his eyes scanning me and walking back up to the cottage. I throw the hat on the ground in frustration. I sit in the shade of the trees until night fall, thinking of what to say, how to explain. As the sky fills with stars and becomes a midnight blue I realize I love him. I can't lose him now.

I enter the home warily, taking soft steps, hoping I can just escape to my room and avoid the situation all together but that doesn't happen. Wesley appears in the doorway of the kitchen and he's looking at me in a way I've never seen him do. I say nothing, waiting for backlash.

"What's your name?" He asks, advancing towards me. "Why did you lie?"

"It's Anastasia." I pause. How do I not come off as crazy? "I lied because I wanted more than what family had for me. I'm sorry. I truly am grateful for what you've done for me, sir, I wish no trouble."

Wesley gives a small smile and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"What were you looking for?"

I look down at my feet, trying to gather my thoughts.

"Freedom." I say with a small, watery smile. Wesley stares into my eyes and I look back just as intense. His eyes are bright and full of hope.

"I want you to stay here." Wesley breathes like it was something to get off his chest. My chest feels warm. "I also want to tell you something."

"What is it?" I ask, hoping for the best.

"Anastasia, I think I'm in love with you."



My breath catches. I've never thought of a man in this way, and for the first one to actually love me back makes my heart feel like it's about to burst. I embrace him. His strong arms enrapture me and I feel a sense of belonging.

"I think I love you too." I whisper in his ear, a small laugh on my lips. I feel lips on my cheek and I blush furiously.

"I can still work in the fields, right? I like working with you." I say.

"Of course, darling. You're a strong woman. I wouldn't love you if you weren't."

Finally, I'm home.

Ink by Jake Driver

