

The Train is Never Late
by Ashley Andrews

The train is never late, so I sit, and I wait. The iron rail proves unforgiving to my soft body unaccustomed to life anywhere but home. I stare at my shoes—the first *new* pair my parents have ever purchased for me—and smile at the scuffs. How furious they would be. Early morning sunlight shines down on me through a gap in the trees, and for a moment, I bask in it.

A bird calls out the well-worn words of my father. "All I'm saying—kah—is that we knew—kah—knew—kah—that this would happen when we had *her*—kah—instead of a son!" Silence takes the place of the responding bird's objection, the one acting as my mother, and the accuracy of the silence might be the worst of it all. On my walk here, I filled a small thermos with stream water. I drink from it now to chase away the heavy taste of disappointment lodged in my throat.

I shake my head and laugh. I look down at my mismatched clothes, chosen deliberately because I could. I can imagine my mother's eyes twitching if she were to see me now. She would never be in the woods like this, though, and lucky for me, they would never expect I would either. I'm nearly lightheaded from the power of making my own decisions. Unfortunately, today I also make my last.

So now I sit, and I wait for the train that will help me end my life. Perhaps I'm being dramatic, but I've spent my entire life waiting for it to start. Now that my father has taken that away, I have nothing left. I've never had control over anything at all. Today that changes.

I've seen the suitors come, asking for my hand. I never thought he would give me to one. They announced last night that they had made a deal. Then my mother packed my things and told

me that my new husband would be there in the morning. *He could be nice*, I think. *Or he might be just like father and mother*. He's probably there now. Looking for the wife he bought.

My stolen hand falls on the rough suitcase sitting beside the tracks. *My mother's bag*, I still think when I see it, although it hasn't been hers for a decade. The seams stretch now from capacity as much as age. They would burst if it were to make a journey as long as the one that they're expecting of me.

Chill bumps spread across my shoulders as my cloak drifts lower on my arms. I wrap it tighter around me to ward off the morning air and lie back on the wooden path of my future. The tightness in my back fades as the planks begin to vibrate. I allow a small smile at the vision of freedom that shakes free in my head. The sound of birdsong that I had taken for granted disappears. They must hear something I don't.

"Odd place for a nap, no?" says a voice too unfamiliar to be my imagination.

I jump to my feet and get a head rush. I look around, expecting to see the interloper, but all I see is a wall of green on each side of the tracks. Foliage climbs trees in search of more sunlight.

"Show yourself," I say in a voice more confident than I feel.

A deep chuckle breaks the barrier of the woods first, and then I see a dark shock of hair and a brilliant smile. Both belong to an unfamiliar face, and I realize that I might be in danger. The irony of the situation I've placed myself in is not lost on me.

"My father's the sheriff," I lie. "He knows I'm here."

"That's interesting," the stranger responds, laughing. "I didn't know I had another sister."

"You're... the sheriff's boy?"

"And you're the miller's daughter." He holds his hand out to me, either in greeting or so he can pull me from the tracks.

"I don't know you," I say, holding my arms against my chest.

The tracks' rumbling grows louder, and the first whistle marks the air between us with urgency. His nostrils flare, and his eyes widen minutely, but his voice remains calm. He must have experience with horses.

"Our mothers go to the market together every other Thursday. I believe they've wished us married since before either of us could walk," he jokes, rubbing the back of his neck. He glances at a watch on his wrist. "Thank God the train was late today."

"What?"

"It's just that the train is never late. I'm so thankful it was today."

I tuck a stray hair behind my ear. A coppery taste fills my mouth, and I realize I've been chewing on my lip. His eyes zero in on the crimson blossoming against the white of my teeth, and he pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and offers it to me.

I nod, and he walks up and presses the soft fabric to my lip.

His eyes meet mine. I blush. He glances to the ground and then back to me. The perfect temperature morning suddenly feels too warm, and I find that I, for once, am having trouble breathing. I catch a hint of fresh-baked bread and spices on his clothes. My mouth waters, and my cheeks flush again. Then the second train whistle breaks the silence, and his eyes widen even more.

"Evan," he says as he offers me his hand.

Twice he has offered me his hand. So many men have asked for mine. Have any ever offered me theirs?

"Annalise," I reply and place my hand in his. He takes a shuddering breath and smiles at me. I smile my first real smile in a long time.

I don't believe in signs, but the train *was* late today.

END