

## The Will of a Woman

“Dearest sister, you’ll never believe how exciting life is here in Rhode Island.....”

Claire stops the letter she is writing to her sister and reflects on all that has occurred to her since her arrival in Portsmouth. Her eyes flicker over her dog, Hope, who is quietly sleeping by the fire pit. She smiles as she looks around her home and finally down onto her stomach, which was swelled with the child she was to bear. Claire sighs and thinks back to the day it all began, only two years ago.

**“Land Ho!”**

The cry from the sailor jolts Claire from her sleep in her cabin aboard the *Voyager*. Moaning slightly with the lack of rest, Claire removes herself from the cot and dresses for the day. She places on a simple blue underskirt and a gray cotton overdress along with a gray coat with blue trim. Claire sends a silent prayer of thanks to her sister, Louise, who utilized her skilled and crafty hands to create her entire wardrobe for her travels. Claire’s eyes mist a little as she remembers the day her sister presented her with the finery, but she quickly shakes it off as foolishness and finishes dressing. She pulls her golden hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, and places on her shoes. Claire gives herself a quick look in the reflective window then she sets forth from her cabin.

The wind rushes to meet her as she climbs from the hull of the ship onto the deck. Claire longs to spread her arms wide to take in the air and the vast sea, but she refrains from such unseemly behavior. Claire walks lightly and quietly to the railing of the ship, from where she could see the port. For a moment she panicked, realizing she was about to enter a new place, a new state, without her sister at her side. Claire mentally scolded

herself for acting so childishly this morning. Why, she is a grown woman, going out into the world! This is no time for such childish antics.

The bump of the ship as it hits the docks startles Claire out of her thought, and into an excited state. She had finally arrived in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Here was where Claire would make her living as a seamstress, for she shared the talent of her sister. She quickly went below and gathered her belongings and enlisted quite a few willing sailors to aid her in her departure. As she disembarked from the ship, Claire paused. Only a few more steps, she thought, and I am completely on my own. Claire stood there, paralyzed momentarily in fear, until one of the crew bumped into her on his way down to land. Claire started a little, and re-entered reality. She quickly descended the walkway and gave directions to the waiting porters to her new residence.

Both of Claire's parents had passed on last year due to illness, and had left all they owned to Claire and Louise. Claire had used part of her inheritance to purchase a small cottage in the town of Portsmouth a few weeks back. She went there now, to officially move in. The house was not huge: it had two bedrooms, one 'common' room, a kitchen nook and a latrine. Yet for Claire, it was absolutely perfect, for it was *hers*. After she had paid the porters, Claire took a quick tour of the cottage, noting places that needed improvement and places that were just right. In what was to be her bedroom the bed was made, along with a foreign blanket with an attached note. Puzzled, Claire picked up the note: "Ms. Werner, I pray that your trip went well and you are pleased with your cottage. This blanket is but a small token of your welcome. Please join myself and a small group of others for supper tomorrow. Sincerely, Judith Gibbons."

Judith Gibbons? The mayor's wife? Why would the wife of the most powerful man in town have any interest in a simple girl from Virginia territory? Claire was extremely perplexed now. Well, she thought, no use in fretting about it. I'll learn all that there is to know tomorrow. With this thought Claire pushed the note from her mind and set herself to the hideous task of unpacking.

Claire was lounging in her chair by the fire pit, drowsing a little, when she heard a knock at her door. Surprised, for she had not realized anyone would be alert of her arrival, Claire answered the door to find a young woman standing there. This young woman looked to be about Claire's age, but that is where the similarities ended. Her hair was copper colored and curly, her cheeks ruddy. Her green eyes sparkled and she had what seemed to be laugh lines along her brow. The girl's dress was a dull brown and looked to be well worn, as were her shoes. She looked a little surprised as well to see Claire there, for it was obvious she had not been expecting to see another woman at the door, let alone one her own age.

Claire composed herself first. "May I help you?" Claire asked it what she hoped was a sophisticated yet warm tone.

"Oh yes! My name is Rosemary Jackson. I'm the daughter of Marv Jackson, the town baker. We just got wind that someone had finally settled here and Pa sent me out with this basket here to welcome whoever it is to the town!" Rosemary said, looking more and more cheerful with each word. She seemed somewhat relieved that it was Claire that had moved in, and not a male. Claire was completely taken aback. She wondered what Rosemary's reaction could mean about this town she now called home.

“Well,” Claire stated at last, “that is awfully nice of you. Won’t you come in?”

“Oh, I can’t stay. I have to go help Pa with an order, but please feel free to drop by the shop whenever you want to! There’s a sign about the door, you can’t miss it!”

Rosemary quickly handed Claire the basket. “Oh, please excuse my manners, but I never caught your name.”

Claire smiled at this merry woman. “I’m called Claire. My full name is Claire Werner, from Virginia.”

Rosemary gave a tentative smile back. “Well Miss Claire, I hope you feel right at home here in Portsmouth.” And with this comment Rosemary turned back for the town. Claire stood in the doorway and watched her walk off, deciding that moment that she was going to be friends with the joyful girl that was Rosemary Jackson. Remembering the basket in her hands, Claire quickly returned into the house and opened the bundle. Inside laid some hot rolls and small cakes, along with another note: “To whoever lives here, please take these small gifts as a gesture of our happiness at your arrival. Please excuse Rosemary; she does love to talk so. Sincerely, Marv Jackson.” Claire smiled at this description of Rosemary, and quickly bit into one of the rolls. She sighed with pleasure, for the roll was utterly delicious. Deciding to save the rest for tomorrow, she finished off the roll in her hand and went off to bed, wondering just what tomorrow may ensue.

Claire rose with the dawn, and gave a little start at the unfamiliar surroundings. Then she laughed, for she remembered that she was in her new Rhode Island. Smiling, Claire walked to the wardrobe to select her first impression outfit. She decided on a light green skirt with a darker green overdress with a high collar. Her hair she gathered behind her head and tied off with a light green scarf that matched her skirt. Claire slipped on her

brown boots and quickly warmed two of the remaining rolls over the fire pit before setting out to explore the town.

Portsmouth was not nearly as large as her home town. There was only one baker, one miller, one blacksmith, two inns, and one other seamstress, to whom Claire would learn from. There was the town church, which was headed by Reverend Nicolas Ryans. Finally, in the middle of Portsmouth was the town square and town hall, where Mayor William Gibbons resided. Claire walked swiftly and quickly into the area, which was already bustling with people. Claire went to Mistress Fulton, the seamstress, first to introduce herself and learn about her duties. The shop was across the square from Town Hall, nestled into a small space by one of the inns. Upon entering the shop, she was quickly greeted by the excitable yet grandmotherly Mistress Fulton.

“So you’re Claire Werner? Good, you look like a strong respectable woman. You’ll be wonderful. And you are quite lovely, which can’t hurt at all!” Mistress Fulton said with a wink at that last comment, which made Claire blush a little. “Come along and let me show you around. You won’t have to start till tomorrow, though I’d give you some time to settle in and learn where everything is.”

Claire smiled at this elder, who seemed to be one of the kindest persons that Claire had ever met. Mistress Fulton seemed glad and content to have Claire here, but was also willing to wait for the extra hands. After the tour of the shop, Mistress Fulton sent Claire on her way, with instructions to arrive at the shop an hour after dawn tomorrow. It was almost time to meet Madam Gibbons at the Town Hall for supper, so Claire headed that way next.

As she neared the entrance to the building, she saw a gaggle of women who seemed to be waiting for someone. When Claire was within speaking distance, one of the women called out “Are you Claire Werner of Virginia?”

Claire slowed. “Yes, ma’am. I am she.”

The woman smiled. “Excellent. I am Judith Gibbons, wife to Mayor Gibbons. These are my companions: Wilma Asbury, wife of Miller James Asbury; Courtney Lionel, wife of Stan Lionel the town crier; and Denise Ryans, wife of Reverend Nicolas Ryans.” Madam Gibbons was an imposing woman of short stature. She wore a grey dress with a pale yellow overcoat, and had her raven black hair pulled into a severe bun high on her head. Madam Gibbons indicated each woman in turn: Madam Asbury was a pudgy woman in a brown dress and orange overcoat with cropped mouse brown hair; Madam Lionel was a tall gangly woman in a navy dress and light blue coat with her gray hair in a low bun; and Madam Ryans was a fierce looking woman with a deep purple dress and white overcoat with her light blonde hair hidden by a hood. Claire smiled and nodded to each in turn, and all but Madam Ryans returned her pleasant look.

“Thank you all for the invitation and the gift; both were quite warming.” Claire smiled.

Madam Gibbons returned the smile. “Think nothing of it. Shall you follow us to supper?” It was not a request. Claire followed the women back into Town Hall and down a corridor into an open room. On the table lay a variety of small foods that were deemed suitable for a meeting of ladies. The five women each received a small plate of the food and settled at the table.

Madam Gibbons cleared her throat. “Now, my dear, am I correct in saying that you are training to become our new seamstress?”

“Yes ma’am.” Claire answered. “I begin my training tomorrow under Mistress Fulton. I am anxious to begin, for I do love embroidery so.”

Madam Gibbons seemed pleased. “Good, good. It’s always nice to see women who are willing to do their duty well. Now, have you met anyone in town yet?”

“Why, yes” Claire replied, a little startled at this change in conversation. “Besides the ladies present here, I have met Mistress Fulton and Miss Rosemary Jackson, the baker’s daughter.”

“And I’m guessing the girl nearly talked your head off?” interceded Madam Ryans. “That chit has no manners and is no better than she should be.”

Claire, shocked at this blunt and painful description of her new friend, retorted “Actually, I found her quite delightful.”

Madam Ryans sneered at this. “Oh I’m sure you did. Let me just give you a small warning, Ms. Werner. There are some people in this town who one should associate with, and some people one should have no dealing with. All ladies in this room are the former, while Rosemary Jackson, along with her father and that blacksmith, are the latter. Now, which will you choose?”

All eyes fell on Claire, who was silently outraged at this blatant attempt to control her life here before it even began! Claire schooled her face into a calm and cold expression, and rose to her feet. “I’m sorry to say that I disagree with you on those points, Madam Ryans. I find Rosemary Jackson to be a wonderful person, and if her father and the blacksmith are categorized with her then I assume I shall find them fine as well! Now,

if you'll excuse me, I'll show myself out." And with this final shocking statement, Claire Werner left the female elite and quickly exited the building.

Once outside, Claire cooled her anger by walking briskly over to the baker's shop, where she entered the door in a hurricane of emotion. Inside the warm and cozy store stood Rosemary and two other men. One of the men was obviously Marv Jackson, for he had Rosemary's eyes and laugh-lines, and had on the garb of a baker. The other was much younger, looking to be only two years Claire's senior. He had on the dark coarse clothes of one who worked hard. The stranger had close-cropped light brown hair and warm brown eyes that widened when he beheld the whirlwind of Claire. All three stared at Claire for a moment in surprise.

Rosemary didn't wait long to start talking. "Oh Ms. Claire, it is so nice to see you again! How are you settling in? Did you like the rolls?"

Claire gave the other girl a warm grin. "Yes Rosemary, the rolls were absolutely incredible. I'm settling quite well, or at least I will once I calm down."

The baker stood up. "Hello, may I take it that you are the new resident of the cottage? My name is Marv Jackson, and this here is my store. You are?"

"I'm Claire Werner, from Virginia, sir." Claire smiled.

He smiled back at her. "Well, welcome to Portsmouth Ms. Werner. As my note said, we are right happy to have you here. Now, have you met yon Lucas Tylertown? He is our blacksmith and a good friend of mine."

At this Lucas himself stood and extended his hand with a "How do you do?"

Claire, stunned that she was blushing a little, took his hand with "Quite well. Yourself?" Lucas merely smiled in reply.

“Now Ms. Werner, may I inquire just what has got you in such a mood?” asked Mr. Jackson. “You right near scared the wits out of me when you came in just now!”

Claire’s smile turned into a frown. “I just came from supper with Madam Gibbons and the horde of followers. I am still reeling with some of the statements that were said and implied.”

“Ah that explains it” Mr. Jackson said cryptically. “Those four are not the most hospitable people in this town. I take it you weren’t invited back for tea?”

Claire nearly snorted. “No sir, especially since I walked out on all of them. They were attempting to tell me what to do and how to live in this town, and I have just arrived!”

Mr. Jackson smiled tiredly. “Well, here you are among friends, and I can assure you that Mistress Fulton is the same. Now, how did you like those rolls of mine?”

Turning the conversation to more pleasant topics, Claire found herself relaxing with these simple people. Here she felt comfortable and at ease for the first time since her arrival in Portsmouth. However, Claire constantly found herself glancing at Lucas when she believed he was unaware. Lucas was very affable with Mr. Jackson and his daughter, treating the latter almost like a sister. When Claire realized that dark was falling, she was quite reluctant to depart. Nevertheless, when she did finally get up to leave, she did not do so empty-handed. Mr. Jackson, despite her protests, insisted on sending her home with more rolls and a wonderful fruit tart. Also, to her inner delight, Lucas volunteered to walk her home.

“Truly, Mr. Tylertown, this is unnecessary. I hate to be a burden.” Claire half-heartedly attempted to dissuade Lucas from accompanying her.

“Nonsense. You never know what could occur to a young woman at night, and I’d feel better if I knew you were safe at home.” Lucas wouldn’t budge, so Claire conceded graciously with a simple “As you wish.”

The pair walked home in the twilight, talking some about the goodness of Rosemary and Marv Jackson and how fortunate they were to know such excellent people. They carried on in this manner for some time, until they arrived at the cottage.

“Here we are. I trust you’ll be able to handle things from here, Ms. Werner?” Lucas asked with a teasing light in his eyes.

She just smiled. “I believe so, Mr. Tylertown. However, if you could open the door for me, I’d be able to set this wondrous food down much easier.” He laughed and obliged her. As they entered the cottage and Claire went forth to set her food upon the table, there came a creak that seemed to come from the other side of the room.

Claire froze, and then cried out to Lucas: “Mr. Tylertown, I fear someone is in my home!”

Lucas ran to her just as the intruder leaped at Claire, brandishing a knife. Lucas seized the other man and the two grappled for what seemed to Claire like a millennium. Finally Lucas managed to knock the intruder’s head against the floor, forcing him into unconsciousness. Claire ran to start a fire so they may reveal the identity of her attacker. The light shone upon a middle-aged man of average height and build with graying black hair and a sharp beak nose. When Lucas saw who it was, he swore loudly.

“Mr. Tylertown, why do you swear so? Surely you don’t know this man!” cried Claire.

“On the contrary, Ms. Claire, I do know him. You met his wife earlier this evening. This is Stan Lionel, the Portsmouth town crier. No doubt he was sent by his wife and her friends to scare you into joining their little circle. They must be quite jealous of you if they want you to join them this badly.”

“Jealous? Why would they feel that? I am an unmarried woman from the South. What could I possibly have that they do not?” Claire could not comprehend why the esteemed women would feel envy towards her.

Lucas gave her an exasperated look. “Do you really not see it, Ms. Claire? You’re beautiful, which is something those four are most certainly not. They know it, and that is why they envy you.”

Claire flushed a fiery red at this for she had not even thought of this idea. Of course, she thought. That must be why Madam Ryans was so cold to me to begin with!

“Well what must we do now? Surely we cannot leave him here!” Claire and Lucas conferred about this for a few minutes and finally decided to tie him down with some rope left over from Claire’s unpacking. Lucas then went off to fetch the mayor and the reverend, with Claire standing just outside waiting anxiously for his return. But, instead of seeing only the trio return as she expected, there was a small crowd following the three men running in front. Following Lucas, Mayor Gibbons, and Reverend Ryans were the female elite and Rosemary and Marv Jackson. Claire, after casting Lucas a quizzical glance, quickly entered and ushered everyone into the cottage to view the sight of Town Crier Lionel, who had regained consciousness.

Mayor Gibbons took the floor. “Stan Lionel, what in heaven’s name are you doing? You have assaulted this woman in her own home! In God’s name, why?”

Master Lionel looked up, and to Claire's amazement, had tears rolling down his cheeks. "I'm sorry!" he cried out. "I know the deed was dastardly and cruel, yet my wife compelled me. She and her friends said that yon Ms. Werner would be the undoing of the town if she did not comply with what they wanted. They said that she wasn't to be hurt, just warned! That's all I was supposed to do!"

Mayor Gibbons and Reverend Ryans both slowly turned to look at the four wives, as did all others in the room. An empty circle appeared around the four, as if they had suddenly become infectious. In a slow voice, Mayor Gibbons addressed the wives: "Please tell me this is not true, and you did not enlist this man to attack an innocent woman simply out of spite."

Madam Ryans was not fazed. "Of course we did. That woman would not comply with us and instead befriended yon baker and his daughter, along with that blacksmith. This went completely against what we told her to do, so she must be punished for going in the wrong."

Mayor Gibbons stared at her. "She did not like you, therefore this justifies setting a man with a knife against her? And just what is wrong with associating with the baker, his daughter, or the blacksmith? All three are assets to our community."

Madam Ryans gave an unladylike snort. "They may be, but they are below us. The blacksmith is not from a decent family: why, he is an orphan! How could we be sure he is of good blood? And the baker and his daughter are held in our contempt because of her mother, who also refused to join us. When she went and married that baker, we knew that her daughter was to be shunned as well. She disobeyed, just as Ms. Werner

disobeyed. She was punished by shunning and then had the poor taste to die before her lesson was learned.”

With this last statement, Mr. Jackson went red while Rosemary paled. But the most surprising action of all was made by Reverend Ryans. He walked calmly up to his wife, grabbed her left hand, and quickly removed the wedding band that lay on her finger. Still in that dangerously calm manner, he spoke: “Consider our marriage annulled. No Speaker of God can have such a woman as a wife, one that is vindictive and would eagerly seek the pain of others. Consider yourself a divorced woman, with no rights to my property as a husband would give his wife. Now, leave my sight.”

The entire room went dead silent. All started at the paled now ex-Madam Ryans. The woman stood there for what seemed like hours until slowly she turned and walked out the door, followed quickly by the remaining ‘female elite’. The room remained silent for quite a while after, until finally Mayor Gibbons and Reverend Ryans left with Master Lionel tied between them. Those left were Mr. Jackson, Rosemary, Lucas, and, of course, Claire. The four just stood there until Claire broke the spell by moving to restart the fire. This spurred the other three to grab some of the chairs and rolls and settle in by the fire.

Rosemary spoke first. “Well, that explains why they all seemed to have hated me since I was born. It’s because my mother was strong enough to resist like Ms. Claire, right, Pa?”

“That’s right dear.” Mr. Jackson smiled sadly. “Your mother wouldn’t put up with those women telling her what to do, so she left their circle to come create ours. When she died of pneumonia all those years ago, I assumed those wives would at least take pity on

you. I'm afraid I was wrong. And all that nonsense they said about Lucas was completely shameful."

"I'm used to it." Lucas interceded. "I've received all forms of maltreatment since I can remember. I just wish it hadn't affected Ms. Werner here. That is what annoyed me the most."

Claire went crimson. "Truly, it is alright Mr. Tylertown. None of this was your fault, just the scheming work of four harridans. Please, none of you blame yourselves for any of this trouble. Let us move onto more civil topics, shall we?" All three obliged her in this task. They discussed Mr. Jackson's new recipe for sweet rolls and Lucas's new technique for forging metal. The four of them talked for a few hours until the incident was less of a mental shock and more of a minor disturbance. Finally, as the fire grew dim, Mr. Jackson and Rosemary excused themselves to head home. Lucas stayed behind to aid Claire in cleaning up her cottage.

As the two of them righted the damage that Master Lionel had caused, Lucas asked "Are you sure you'll be ok, Ms. Claire? I do not want you to be frightened tonight."

"I'll be fine, Mr. Tylertown." Claire smiled. "No need to worry for me."

Lucas, instead of smiling, contracted an odd look in his eyes and said solemnly "On the contrary, Ms. Claire, I do worry about you quite a lot." For a moment Claire felt as if she could not breathe. Lucas excused himself with a "Good Evening" and left Claire to her thoughts, which were torn between the fear of the attack and the oddity of Lucas's reaction.

Over the next four months life in Portsmouth changed drastically. Claire became head seamstress for the town, replacing the aged Mistress Fulton. The ex-Madam Ryans moved home to her family in disgrace, never to be seen by Claire again. The remaining three wives were restricted contact with each other, and Madam Lionel almost faced the same charges as her husband, who was convicted of assault and sentenced to five years in the town jail. Mr. Jackson's bakery boomed with business, most from those who felt guilty for ignoring him and Rosemary for so long. Rosemary was finally able to purchase dresses beyond her dull brown one, which Claire happily helped her choose and gave half-price on. Lucas continued to subtly court Claire until one night, in the bakery, he at last got down on one knee.

Claire was oblivious to the twin tears rolling down her cheeks as she heard the words come from Lucas's mouth: "Claire Werner, since the day I first laid my eyes on you, I couldn't take them off. Will you please do me the honor of marrying me?" Rosemary squeaked with joy and Mr. Jackson beamed with pride. It was not a hard choice for Claire. One simple word fell from her mouth: "Yes."

**“Woof!”**

The sound of Hope's bark startled Claire out of her memories. She smiled at the dog, a wedding present from Mr. Jackson and Rosemary. Claire looked up just as her husband Lucas walked in from his day in the smith. Claire returned to her letter home:

“Yes, dear sister, life in Rhode Island is nothing like I expected; it is even more.”