

## **Last Woman Standing**

JACKSON SHAW, the Marquess of Rivens, never considered the “gypsy blessing” presented to his family during the time of Henry VIII truly a blessing. He viewed it more as a curse. According to the “blessing,” in his thirtieth year, at the Christmas ball hosted by his family, he was to choose a wife among the women attending. The catch was he possessed no choice in the matter. His wife was to be the one who proved herself to be his perfect match, according to the gypsy’s provisions: a woman who would bring prosperity to his land by her love of nature and her generous heart. In his opinion, none of the women vying for his hand appeared to care for anything but themselves.

EVELYN HAWTHORNE comes to River’s End to serve as the companion to the Marchioness of Rivens, his lordship’s grandmother. However, Lady Rivens has more than companionship in mind when she employs the girl, whose late father was a renown horticulturalist. The marchioness means to gather Gerald Hawthorne’s rare specimens to prevent those with less scrupulous ideas from purchasing Hawthorne’s conservatory, and, thereby, stealing away what little choice her grandson has in naming a wife, for all the potential brides must present the Rivenses with a rare flower to demonstrate the lady’s love of nature. Little does the marchioness know Hawthorne’s daughter might not only know something of nature, but be the person to fulfill the gypsy’s blessing.

### **Excerpt from “Last Woman Standing” *A Regency Christmas Proposal Anthology***

#### **Chapter One**

##### **Mid-November 1813, Buckinghamshire**

“Blast it all!” Evelyn growled as her boot again sank in the heavy snow, sending a cold slush seeping in around her ankles. When she departed her father’s estate near the Honour of Grafton, she had not expected snow to the south. Certainly, it had been colder than what was customary for her home shire for this early in the winter months, but she had not thought it possible to encounter a snowstorm this soon. However, what choice did she have but to traverse the two miles to the Rivens’s estate? If she expected to be presented with employment, it was imperative she arrive at the estate today. Lady Rivens’s instructions had been quite specific in that manner. Certainly, neither Evelyn nor her ladyship could have anticipated either the snowstorm or the broken fore axeltree sustained by the mail coach, the only transportation Evelyn could afford. Her nearly empty purse was also the reason she could not hire someone to transport her to the Rivens’s manor—the lack of funds and the sometimes knee-deep snow accumulating in every nook and cranny along the road.

With Gerald Hawthorne’s passing in September, her father’s cousin, and long-time enemy, had spent little time in ordering Evelyn from her family’s small estate, leaving her to beg for assistance from the village’s vicar and his wife until she could secure a position. Vicar Grayson attempted to speak to the man regarding an allowance for her, but all knowledge of her

father's will, which should have provided for her, had been denied by the new master. Despite the Graysons promising to keep her as long as she chose to stay in Northamptonshire, she did not think she could bear to look upon Loyton Hawthorne's face again without executing a bit of damage to the man's too large nose.

"Must keep my temper in its place," she chastised when she stopped to dust the snow off the road marker to determine which way to turn. Darkness would soon be upon her, and she must reach the manor house before she became lost. She had left her trunk at the coaching inn and only carried a small bag with a change of clothes and her personal possessions. "Left Papa's horticultural books in my trunk. I shall not have a need for them here, but I could not leave them to be tossed into the fire as kindling." She had brought with her her father's copy of James Donn's *Hortus Cantabrigiensis, or a Catalogue of Plants, Indigenous and Exotic*, Thomas Dyot Bucknall's *The Orchardist: or, a System of Close Pruning and Medication, for Establishing the Science of Orcharding*, and four volumes of *Phytanthoza-Iconographia* by Johann Wilhelm Weinmann and Ambrosius Karl Bieler, all written in German and one of her father's most prized possessions, for the collection were the first of its kind as a comprehensive botanical work, along with her father's personal copy of the family Bible.

"For all I know, Lady Rivens is as villainous as is Cousin Loyton." These were the words she had hidden from the Graysons and from herself, only just now permitting them to be said aloud. Evelyn had received word of the position as a companion to Lady Rivens through an agency. According to the request, Lady Rivens wished the services of a gentleman's daughter, one preferably comfortable residing in the country, rather than in Town.

Such described Evelyn perfectly. She was the daughter of a gentleman, and, despite being two and twenty, she had spent but two days in London since her coming to England when she was but a newly-minted teen. Until this journey, she had traveled but once and only then because her father had not felt well, and she had refused to permit him out of her sight. She had been eighteen at the time and overwhelmed by the noise and the rush of London. Other than that exception, she possessed a long list of "nevers." Had never eaten snails. Had never seen Egyptian pyramids. Had never been courted by a gentleman. Had never known anything but the bucolic existence her father preferred after the death of his beloved wife and sons. "Have never been to the moon," she grumbled, as she worried once again about whether Lady Rivens would wish her to be more worldly. "All I know of the world can be found within the pages of a book and what my father taught me of nature and flowers." She stopped to consider another thing she should have asked of the position before she agreed to it. "Do you suppose Lady Rivens will require constant nursing?" A deep frown found its way upon Evelyn's features. "I pray such is not the case because I do not have the stomach to clean up another's—"

Evelyn shivered with both a cold gust of air tugging at her pelisse and the remembrance of cleaning the runny noses of two of the Graysons' younger children, as well as mopping up the results of their upset stomachs. "Perhaps if they were my own children, I would not be so queasy," she murmured as tears rushed to her eyes. "Those are two other 'nevers,'" she whispered. As a lady's companion, she would never have a husband or children.

Realizing she must move or freeze to death, she set out again. Following the sign pointing to a narrow lane, she plugged along, side-stepping the deeper snow drifts. Spotting an opening in the wood line, Evelyn hurried forward, wanting to be out of the cold and the dampness. "I shall be fortunate not to come down with an ague."

It was then she heard the cracking sound beneath her feet, and she halted in place. "Blast and double blast!" she lamented. She dared not move, fearing the ice upon which she stood

would crack again, and she would tumble into the frigid water beneath. “How could I have mistaken a frozen pond for a glade?” The idea dumbfounded her. She was customarily quite sensible. Tilting her head back, she called out to the Heavens, “Now what, God?” She lifted her skirt, better to view the ice beneath her feet.

“Perhaps I may be of assistance,” a distinctly baritone voice responded from somewhere off her left shoulder.

Evelyn dared not turn to view whoever had come to her rescue. Any movement could, literally, be her downfall.

“Assistance would be a blessing,” she assured the stranger.

She remained perfectly still as he circled what must be the banks of a pond. When he came into view, she blinked several times to clear her eyes, thinking she must be mistaken, for the man was the most handsome gentleman she had ever encountered. Although her interactions with members of the aristocracy remained limited, she recognized quality when she saw it. Dark, nearly raven-black hair. A well-hewn noble countenance. Full lips, turned up in an engaging smile. Nose, just a bit crooked. Full chest. Trim waist. And wearing a many-caped greatcoat that flapped open in the breeze, providing the impression of his being as strong and dangerous as an ancient conqueror of the land.

Quickly lowering her skirts, she lifted her gaze to meet his. “I am grateful for your presence, sir.”

“I do not often encounter a soul brave enough to venture upon Pandora’s Pond, unless, of course, the ice thickens to a reliable three to four inches, which it rarely does.”

Evelyn found herself blushing. Hopefully, with the darkening shadows, he did not take notice of her embarrassment. “I thought I had simply left the woods for an open glade,” she explained.

He glanced back to the tree line. “I suppose you did. Unfortunately, if you had entered from the opposing tree line, say, over there,” he pointed to the direction where he, evidently, had emerged from the woods, “there is a wider bank.”

Cold and frightened, Evelyn’s response exposed her exasperation. “I shall keep your advice in mind if I have the opportunity to pass this way again. That is, assuming you would agree to extend a hand in my rescue.”

He crossed his arms as if to ward off her growing outrage. “I am no longer certain that is the best course of action.”

Evelyn sputtered, “You cannot mean to walk away without a care? What if the ice cracks, and I fall in?”

“Exactly,” he said. “If the ice cracks from our combined weight, I will be forced to dive in after you, and it is excessively cold out here.”

“You coxcomb!” she growled, just barely stopping herself from stomping her foot in anger. “Very well. Go on about your business. I absolve you of any blame in my demise. I shall manage just fine.” Without waiting for his response, she lifted her small bag in her two hands above her head and gave it a heave-ho in the direction of the bank. Regrettably, the shift of her weight and the icy surface beneath her feet had her windmilling to keep her balance. Tumbling over backward, she lost the battle, slamming hard against the ice. Another louder crack of the surface followed, and Evelyn groaned in helplessness as icy water seeped in around her.

She heard the gentleman’s, “Oh, no. No. No. No!” but she did not turn her head to observe his efforts to reach her. Her vision was blurry, and her limbs felt too heavy for her to lift them.

It was then she felt his hands on her ankles. "Do not move!" he grunted. "I have you!"

He slid her across the ice, tugging her, heels first. As ridiculous as it would appear to those who had never experienced the warring sensation of the heat of his hands combined with the cold surface, Evelyn smiled in response.

At length, his hands were on her knees, then her thighs, and, finally, her waist. He maneuvered her to the side of where he was stretched out upon the ice. He wedged his hands beneath her back and lifted her carefully to a seated position, cradling her to him. "Tell me you are not injured," he pleaded.

She pressed a wet glove to her forehead and sought a look at her surroundings. "Allow me a moment," she murmured.

"I fear we do not have a moment," he said in cautious tones. "We are still on the ice, and I do not think it will long support the both of us."

Evelyn attempted to make sense of his words, but her head still buzzed, like a swarm of bees.

"Bear with me," he said. She felt him prop her weight against what certainly was a large rock, and then his heat and his closeness were gone. She heard the crunch of his boots on the snow behind her, before, with a grunt, he lifted her upward in what was surely an awkward position for him. Swinging her around, he again placed her down, this time on the trunk of a fallen tree. He braced her in an upright position with a hand on her shoulder to keep her steady. The clean scent of soap and the heat of his body only added to her incoherence. Other than her father and grandfather, Evelyn had never been so close to a gentleman in her life. "You will pardon me, but I should examine the back of your head. You took quite a fall."

Evelyn managed to shrug away his suggestion. "I only require a minute," she insisted, blinking several times to keep his image in focus.

Up close, his smile was as breathtaking as she suspected it would be. "I see you possess pluck," he said. "I like pluck, but now is not the time for it."

He reached for the back of her head, but Evelyn swatted away his hands. "I said I shall be well."

"And so you did." A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "But I require proof. Allow me to view you standing on your own." He stood and stepped back to provide her room.

Evelyn reached for the rough texture of the tree's bark to steady herself and pushed upward; however, before her knees could lock in place, she pitched forward into the gentleman's waiting arms.

"As I suspected," he said as he lifted her to him. "We must see you to your destination."

"Oh, no," she protested, while clinging tightly to his shoulders, fearing if she let go, she would land face first in the snow. "Lady Rivens is expecting a healthy companion, not an invalid."

He looked at her suspiciously. "You are to serve Lady Rivens?"

"If you would permit me to retrieve my bag, I could provide proof of my placement from the agency."

"Never mind your bag and the placement papers; at this moment, it is imperative I see you to some place warm. You are shivering, and, I admit, the cold mixed with my wet clothes are combining to make me uncomfortable." He lifted her higher in his arms, and Evelyn welcomed his warmth. "Then again," he said with a wicked smile, "perhaps it is your closeness and the sweet smell of lavender that has me experiencing a lightheadedness comparable to your own. Do you suppose we are in some sort of delirium?"

She stiffened in anger at his remark. "You may place me down any time you wish!"

He barked a laugh. "Such is the rub, my dear. I enjoy the feel of you in my arms." He started off in the direction from which he had entered the glade.

"Where do you think you are taking me? Place me down at once!" A revealing heat of what she prayed appeared to be disbelief flooded her cheeks.

"I am taking you to my manor," he insisted. "It is but a quarter mile removed."

"But I cannot!" She twisted to release herself from his hold, but he clutched her tighter to him.

"Cease your caterwauling," he ordered before giving her a little shake. "We will have a physician examine your head, and, if all is well, you may begin your duties to her ladyship."

"My things?" she protested weakly.

"I will send someone for your bag."

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Jackson Shaw, the Marquess of Rivens, called to his servant, "Fetch Doctor Perkins, at once." The footman, who had been rushing across the courtyard to assist him, made an immediate turn toward the stables. The door to the manor house remained open, and so he strode through and headed for the stairs, calling out orders in his wake. "Watkins, have a maid bring the lady some tea. She is quite chilled." Realizing he required more information, he paused on the steps. "Which room has been set aside for Lady Rivens's companion?"

"The blue room, my lord," Watkins responded.

The woman whose body warmed his in a most delicious manner sucked in a sharp breath. "You said this was your manor."

He chuckled easily as he watched several revealing facts dawn upon her lovely countenance. "It is."

Heat flooded her features. "Then...then...you are—"

"Exactly. Lord Rivens at your disposal. Her ladyship is my grandmother." He smiled at her and leaned closer to whisper, "Not that I mind holding you close, but I would prefer to do so without an audience."

To his delight, the woman's eyes sparked in outrage. "You are incorrigible!"

"Yes, I am."

Jackson knew she wished to take him to task for his actions, but it was obvious she now realized he was her employer. As a matter of moral principle, unlike many within the *ton*, he was not the type of aristocrat who preyed upon his servants, but Jackson could not deny his instant attraction to this particular woman.

At length, he shouldered open the door to the room the maid indicated was to be the lady's chambers. "Inform my grandmother her new companion has arrived," he instructed as he set the woman down upon the bed. He paused to catch his breath as the lady scooted further up the bed, putting distance between them. Something about her action vexed his sense of honor, or, perhaps, it simply called to his sense of mischief.

He looked at her, a full smile curving his lips. "Not even a word of gratitude, my dear? After all, I risked my life to save you from your precarious blunder, likely ruining one of my favorite overcoats, not to mention my carrying you all the way to this well-furnished room."

"Naturally, you own my deepest gratitude, my lord." What appeared to be unease caused her to stiffen. Her shoulders were rigid.

In contrast, Jackson's smile grew wider. He did not know from where the lady hailed, but he certainly enjoyed the soft roll of some of her *r*'s and the manner in which she strung one word

to another, with the barest of pauses between them. "I fear your statement of appreciation lacks genuine tones, especially when I must prompt its delivery. The words feel insincere."

He had listened carefully to her response, a trick he had learned from his service to the Home Office: Listen for hints of from where a person hailed. Even when the lady was angry with him, there was a smooth slide of one word to the next that could become quite addicting, especially in a moment of passion. Thinking upon the matter, he finally realized she must have spent more than a few years on the American continent, for she spoke in the same manner as those around the city of Charleston, South Carolina, if he were not mistaken.

He had traveled there once for the Home Office, in pursuit of a traitor to King George. For nearly a year, Jackson had chased Richard Sherrill from the Canadian frontier, through the wilderness, and over the mountains into what the Americans called *the Carolinas*. Unfortunately, the scoundrel had escaped on the last ship leaving the Charleston harbor before the population of the city was beset upon by a great storm, which lasted days and destroyed parts of the harbor, so Jackson had not been able to give pursuit. He had hoped the man had gone overboard into the sea and had not escaped, but Jackson had no way of knowing for certain, for when he had returned to England, he had received news of his father's passing and had rushed home to secure the estate and the title.

Shaking off the anger that always accompanied his remembrance of the incident, a rare one where he had failed in his assignment, Jackson again concentrated on the woman's speech. He decided he liked the way she pronounced her words. It made him feel "cherished," even when she meant to chastise him.

Her eyes flashed in derision. "All I can do is express my gratitude, my lord. I possess no money to speak of, and I cannot imagine you require what few pennies there are in my purse as payment for your kindness." She gestured to the well-established room. "Your own purse is obviously deeper than that of one of your grandmother's employees."

"My employees," he purposely corrected, just to irritate her a bit more. "I am the master of this estate. It is called *River's End* for it lies near Quainton Malet and the River Ray, where the waters rise at Quainton Hill and flow west toward Oxfordshire. My ancestors in the 1300s were called 'Rivers,' but that name was corrupted on several documents to become *Rivens* by the late 1400s."

She swallowed hard. The lady, obviously, had not long been accustomed to cowing to her employer. "Pray, what do you expect other than my appreciation?"

He had led her exactly to where he wanted her. "I suppose I must settle for this."

He leaned toward her. Slowly, but purposely. Providing her time to object, while praying she would not. The lady's lips parted in outrage, but no words were uttered. His hand caught her jaw, and he tilted her chin upward. For an elongated moment, their gazes remained locked, and, then, he covered her mouth with his. A soft sigh slipped from her lips, and Jackson felt himself harden. The lady knew absolutely nothing about kissing, but he had no doubt she was teachable, for she did not draw back, but, rather, clung to him. He was not certain why he had chosen to kiss her, for he was a firm believer that kissing was infinitely more intimate than was copulation. Kissing required a commitment between a man and a woman, where sexual relations did not. He had never kissed any woman with whom he had lain. If he and this particular lady had had more time, he would have been more than willing to explore her mouth thoroughly, but the distinct sound of his grandmother's cane tapping along the passageway had him pulling away and standing upright in what he hoped was an innocent stance, just before Lady Rivens entered the room.

“What are you doing in here, Jackson?” his grandmother asked as she eyed him suspiciously.

“I did not wish to leave the lady alone,” he said obediently, but from the look his grandmother presented him, her ladyship was not fooled by his tale. A quick glance at the woman who only moments earlier had been in his arms showed the lady sat with her head down in a subservient position. “The lady,” he gestured to the woman before suddenly realizing how flushed her cheeks appeared, and a bit of pride made its way to his chest, “hit her head in a fall on the ice. She appeared confused and was not capable of standing on her own.”

His grandmother’s frown deepened. “A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.”

“I fear I do not understand, Grandmother.”

“Exactly. Now be off with you. Leave Miss Hawthorne to me.” At least, now Jackson knew the woman’s name. “I shall watch over the chit until Perkins arrives. You and I both know a gentleman would never purposely tarnish a lady’s reputation.” She gestured to the door with her cane. “Be about your business and permit me to be about mine.”

Jackson turned to the lady to present her a bow of farewell. “Although we were never officially introduced, I beg you to pardon both my manners and any rough handling you suffered when I attempted to assist you. Welcome to River’s End, Miss Hawthorne.” With that, Jackson strode from the room, but with each step he wished to return and continue Miss Hawthorne’s lessons in what his body hoped would be sexual congress. Never had a woman shaken him so thoroughly as had this country miss, and he was suddenly wondering how he could spend his days in the same house with her without touching her again. And dare he touch her again? “Not without extending my hand in marriage,” he cautioned. He paused at the door to his chambers to reset the course for which he was intended: After all, a servant could not be the new Marchioness of Rivens, and this was the year he was expected to choose a bride from those attending his grandmother’s annual Christmas ball. “It is settled and out of my hands, at this point.”