

The End

Jack simply refused to believe it. He knew that his family resented Livvie. He wouldn't have put it past one of them to make up a story to discredit Livvie and ruin his marriage. But Gervaise was different. Gervaise was not only his friend, but had always stood up for her, even when she'd been caught gambling. Gervaise had even recovered the pearls Livvie had pawned to cover one of her debts. Jack's wedding present to her in those days before the cracks had begun to show in their relationship. And when the whispers had begun about her suspicious behavior with her cousin Tristram, Gervaise had been the first to defend her.

But this afternoon when Jack's sister had accused Livvie of trysting with her cousin, Gervaise hadn't been able to meet Jack's eyes.

"What do you know, Gervaise?" Jack had demanded.

They had been in the library sharing a glass of port when Glynnis stormed in, back rigid, eyes burning with outrage. "Well, you can't deny it any more, Jack. I saw her with my own eyes. She is making love to her cousin right where any passing person could see it."

Gervaise rolled his glass in his hand, swirling the dark rasin-colored liquer around. "I'm sure it's a mistake, Jack." But he hadn't sounded like he believed it.

"It's no mistake," Glynnis had assured him, her voice as strident as her posture. Hands on hips, sharp chin forward, eyes flashing. "They're in the fishing cottage."

Jack swore his heart stopped beating. The fishing cottage was their haven, his and Livvie's. It had always been his personal hideaway, but after the wedding, when the tension had grown too great with the family, he had begun to take Livvie with him. It had taken her only two visits to fill it with pillows and rugs and chintz curtains. Jack had thought it charming. He'd also kept from telling her that

it didn't matter if the bed were covered in sackcloth and the floors with rushes, as long as she was there, it was heaven.

She never went there without him. Not ever.

Jack couldn't ignore the rumors any longer. Pushing past his sister, he'd stormed out of the house.

"Jack," Gervaise had protested, jumping to his feet to follow. "Don't do anything rash."

But Jack didn't listen.

He was stalking down the path behind the gardens when he ran across his other sister Millicent coming his way. Her color was high and she held her parasol like a weapon in her hands.

"Millicent," he asked. "Have you seen Livvie?"

Millicent looked quickly up, her features pinched and preoccupied. But that didn't mean anything. Millicent's features always looked pinched. Jack couldn't remember the last time anything had made her happy.

"What?" she asked, casting a quick look over her shoulder.

"Livvie," Jack repeated, losing his patience. "Glynnis said she thought he'd seen Livvie out here."

For a moment, Jack wasn't sure whether Millicent would answer him. She just stood there, peering back the way she'd come as if looking for something. Jack couldn't see anything that way but the sweeping lawns.

"For heaven's sake, Millicent, if you've seen her tell me."

He couldn't hope any longer. He needed to confront Livvie. He needed to find out if she'd betrayed him.

Not Livvie, he thought, anguished. Not his beautiful, sweet Livvie. She wouldn't have.

She *wouldn't*.

Millicent must have made up her mind, because she finally turned back to him. Her features had

taken on a look of purpose, and she straightened her shoulders. Jack almost told her to stop. To not speak another word. For just a few more moments, he wanted to believe they were all wrong.

"The fishing cottage," she said, sounding defiant.

A great hole seemed to open up inside his chest. "What about it?"

She was a good four inches shorter than he, but Jack had never known Millicent to be cowed by anyone. She stood her ground, her chin up. "It's where you'll find your wife. And she's not alone."

He wanted to tell her not to be absurd. The words lodged in his throat like bad meat. Spinning on his heel, he strode past her down the path. *No* he kept saying to himself. *No, no, no.* But he walked on through the spinney and down toward the bank of the River Ouse where generations of Wyndham children had wasted lazy summer days fishing and swimming.

Perched on the bank among the willows was an old stone and thatch cottage that had survived the Wyndhams for just as many generations. It looked so still here. Millicent couldn't be right. He would open the door to find nothing more than the old bed made without a wrinkle with the bright blue and white quilt. The table would be scrubbed clean and holding the little ceramic vase Livvie always filled with flowers for their visits. The fireplace would be cold and empty.

He knew he was wrong when he saw the horse tied behind the cottage. It brought him to a dead halt. He knew that horse. The chestnut mare belonged to Livvie's cousin Tristram.

"I'm sure there's an explanation," Gervaise cautioned behind him. "I mean, she couldn't possibly try and pawn another man's babe off on you."

Jack turned on Gervaise to see him looking aghast. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

"I'm sorry," Gervaise said, hand up. "Of course the baby is yours."

She had only just told him, laughing and dancing. She couldn't have been acting. No one could manufacture that kind of bottomless joy.

Could they?

Jack felt as if his chest were being torn apart. Surely he was bleeding. He couldn't feel such

agony unless he were dying.

He walked. His footsteps silent, he stalked right up to the front door and pulled it open.

No one had lied but her. She was in her cousin's arms. For a moment Jack lost sight of her. His field of vision went red, and he struggled to breathe. And when his vision cleared, he wished it hadn't, because he saw that Glynnis hadn't lied. Livvie's hair was tangled around her shoulders and her dress was pulled halfway off her shoulders. There couldn't be any question what had been going on here.

He couldn't believe it. He'd been so stalwart in her defense. He never believed she could betray him like this. He'd been a fool.

Tristram saw him first. "Jack..."

Olivia broke free of her cousin's arms and turned to Jack. He saw she'd been crying, and wondered what she'd been telling her lover.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked.

She must have seen the madness in his eyes, because she took a step closer to her cousin, as if he would protect her from Jack. Well, Jack thought, she'd made her choice.

"You'll meet me tomorrow," he said to her cousin, even then thinking that it would be slaughter. Tristram Gordon was a frail young man, blond with washy blue eyes. A poet.

She had chosen a mediocre poet over the man who adored her.

"No, Jack," Livvie protested, stepping up. "You don't understand."

"Oh," he said, stepping back. "I think I do. Finally. I should have listened to my family. They told me that I was marrying beneath myself. Thankfully that will soon be taken care of."

"No," she begged, reaching out to him. "Jack! You can't do this!"

Before she could touch him, he grabbed her hand and squeezed. For a second he thought he was going to beat her. He even raised his other hand. Rage flooded through him in a hot tide. Betrayal. Despair.

She cringed back and her cousin jumped forward. So Jack hit him instead.

Her cousin somersaulted backwards against the bed. The sound of splintering wood almost drowned out his cry of surprise. Jack felt Livvie pulling at his grasp, but he'd be damned if she'd go to her cousin. Holding on more tightly, he dragged her close enough that he could smell her fear. He could see the pupils dilate in her soft brown eyes.

He hoped she was afraid. He hoped she was terrified. Her cousin was sprawled on the floor unconscious, and Jack still wasn't feeling nearly enough satisfaction.

"I have only one thing to say to you," he told her, his voice as cold as death. He was shaking with the rage of her betrayal, but he'd be damned if he'd lose control before her. He wouldn't let her know just how close he was to howling like a madman. "You have twenty minutes to get off my property. If you try and come back I'll have you arrested."

"No," she protested, her voice high and thin. "Jack, no. You have to listen. *Please*. You're mistaken."

He went on as if he hadn't heard her. "As for your bastard, I'd say let Gordon raise it, but tomorrow morning he'll be dead. So you'd better find somebody else to spread your legs for. Because you're not getting another ha'penny from me or anyone in this family. I never want to see you again."

And before she could say another word, he walked out of the cabin and slammed the door. He was going into the village, and he was going to get drunk. And then, for the first time since his marriage, he was going to bury himself in a whore.

He laughed, the sound bitter. No, he thought. That wasn't true. He'd been burying himself in a whore all along. He just hadn't realized how much she was going to cost him.