

# The Villain and the Valentine

By Sydney F. Grey ©2023

Valentine sat at her opulent dressing table and considered her reflection in the mirror. Her lady's maid, Kitty, had out done herself this time. Her long blonde hair was fashionably coiled on top of her head with tendrils of curls cascading over one shoulder. Her mother's diamond and ruby hairpins, along with the matching necklace, earrings, and bracelet glinted in the candle light and sent tiny fairy lights dancing on the surfaces surrounding her. But she was far from pleased with the display.

Running her evening gloved hands down her red satin dress to her tiny, corseted waist, she looked at the little Fabergé box on the table with her mother's miniature portrait on the lid. She wondered again what that dear lady would think if she saw her now and confirmed her decision not to wear her mother's priceless ruby ring tonight. It would feel too much like a betrayal to her already grieving heart. Kitty anticipated her tears, handing her a lace handkerchief and spritzing her with a floral perfume. Valentine dabbed at her eyes and sniffed.

"Lady Thorndike would be so proud of you, miss, if you don't mind me saying," offered Kitty in a soothing tone. "You are a sight to behold."

Valentine frowned with a sigh. "That's just it, Kitty. I have my mother's face and features, but I don't have her." Another tear escaped her crystal blue eyes under thick, long lashes and dropped on the satin of her skirt, leaving a tiny spot.

Kitty rushed to blot it, but Valentine held up her hand. "Leave it. It will dry soon enough."

With a curtsy, Kitty stepped back and allowed her charge to stand before the full-length mirror beside the wardrobe. "That will do, Kitty. You may inform Dobbs I will come down when the clock strikes."

Alone in her bedchamber, Valentine took a shuddering breath. It felt conceded to acknowledge it to herself, but the girl standing before her was beautiful. Not only beautiful, but stunning. She thought about how the gentlemen her father had invited to dinner tonight would react when she made her entrance on the stairs and the little knot in her brow deepened. She hated feeling like a diamond on display in a jeweler's shop, waiting to be bought, then worn on some gentlemen's finger to be flaunted.

Turning from her reflection in frustration, she crossed the room to her writing desk and retrieved her leather-bound journal from its drawer. Turning to the blank page after her last entry, she took up her quill and wrote two heartbreaking lines.

"Dear God, how I wish I had been born plain and simple, for only then would I find an honest man who would love me for my heart and mind and not for my beauty, or my father's fortune. But, alas, I am resigned within myself that there will never be such a love for me."

Allowing herself no more tears, she lay the journal back in its place and strode stoically from the room, locking the door behind her.

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Theodore Randall was greeted warmly by his host. "I am so pleased you were able to join us, Mr. Randall," piped Lord Thorndike. "I am sure my daughter will be delighted to meet you."

Randall shook the lord's offered hand. "I am very honored to be among your guests this evening, Lord Thorndike. I am eager to meet Miss Thorndike as well. How nice to celebrate St. Valentine's Day in the presence of a true Valentine."

Their greetings were interrupted by the arrival of other guests. Mr. Arthur Smith, Mr. Robert Jones and Mr. Curtis Johnson were escorted to the drawing room, Lord Thorndike making the introductions.

Randall was polished in his manners, but nothing in his demeanor reflected his heartfelt contempt for everyone in the room. And though he was able to converse amiably with the others, his mind was set upon one thing, and one thing only. The jewel that waited for him on the second floor of this house.

But his musings were interrupted by Lord Thorndike's direction that his guests follow him into the hall, a somewhat unusual request for such an occasion. He stood at the back of the group, taking note of the butler stationed at the bottom of the stair, and the footman on duty in the hall beyond it.

Then his gaze was caught by a flash of red at the top of the staircase, and his eyes raised to find the most startlingly beautiful creature he had ever seen. Despite his well-trained ability to hide his innermost thoughts, he betrayed his awe by taking in a sharp breath, along with the other gentlemen.

"Ah, here she is now, my friends. My lovely Valentine," the lord announced, puffing up his chest under his red waistcoat. Striding to the bottom step, he met his daughter and offered his hand. "You are a vision, my dear, just as beautiful as your mother, God rest her soul."

Randall recovered himself by the time the lady's slippered feet landed on the marble floor and went back to his observations. The girl was incredibly lovely, but underneath her demure smile he detected something amiss. Perhaps the girl was still mourning the loss of her mother. It had only been a year since her passing.

What should it matter, Randall thought, as his eyes wandered up the stairs to the hallway leading to the left.

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Valentine did her best to be civil, but lest her kind, shy affect be misconstrued as flirtatious, she knew she came off as dull and melancholy. So be it, she thought, as she was seated by her father's side at the splendidly laid table full of candelabras and arrangements of red roses. Her stomach turned at the display.

Why did her father not know his own daughter's heart better than to put on such a flamboyant show. He knew at least that she was not fond of much company, preferring quiet evenings alone with him when he was home, and if not, with a good book and her journal. The only company she ever longed for was that of Isabel, her best and most trusted friend who had a fine mind and longed, like Valentine, to learn and expand her mind. But a beautiful woman was not entitled to have a mind as well, she knew from the way her father and London society treated her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Smith, a foppish man with a vain air who looked more at her bosom than her face when speaking to her. "Miss Thorndike, are you

in the habit of riding? I have just recently purchased a new mare who would be the most gorgeous mount for a lady of your grace and stature.”

Valentine finished her spoonful of beef consume and set down her spoon. “I am fond of riding on occasion, Mr. Smith, if the weather is fine and the ride not long. I’m sure your mare is lovely. Congratulations on your new acquisition.”

Mr. Smith seemed to find her reply adequate. “Thank you, Miss Thorndike. Perhaps you would like to see her. I would be happy to arrange a short ride in Hyde Park if your father approves. I would be delighted to be seen riding beside you.”

“I thank you, sir, but you see, I am quite shy of riding horses I am not familiar with, as my father can attest to.” Valentine smiled hopefully at her father, wishing he might spare her from Mr. Smith’s invitation.

“Oh, but Valentine, my dear,” Lord Thorndike protested. “It is past time for you to be moping about. What you need is fresh air and sunshine, and Mr. Smith’s invitation sounds like just the thing!”

The red of Valentine’s dress made its way up her to her cheeks and she said no more.

Before Mr. Smith could continue, Mr. Jones chimed in. “Your father tells me you are fond of reading, Miss Thorndike. I wonder if you have been reading the latest serial novel by Stokes, the Dark Angel? I find it ridiculously amusing, don’t you?”

Mr. Jones was an older gentleman of more than forty and spoke to her as if addressing a child.

“I’m sorry to say I have not, Mr. Jones. I find most of the serials in magazines to be quite shallow and full of nonsense, which is perhaps why you find them so entertaining?” Valentine asked with unfeigned interest.

“Certainly!” Mr. Jones replied, his greying brows lifting. “But tell me what book has you interested presently, Miss Thorndike.”

Ah, she thought, finally a promising question.

“I am currently reading the poetry of Mr. Byron, sir, and find his prose to be tolerable, but I am more drawn to the writings of Rev. Charles Spurgeon and his thoughts on theology. Have you read any of his work, Mr. Jones?” Valentine smiled sweetly at Mr. Jones, looking for any glint of recognition in his dull face, but he and the other gentlemen all but rolled their eyes and sniggered at her, all but Mr. Randall, who sat very quiet, watching her over the rim of his wine glass.

To her chagrin, the topic was quickly changed by Mr. Johnson a young man with an annoying habit of itching his nose. “Miss Thorndike, I’m sure that due to your dear mother’s passing you have not had a chance to go dancing at Almack’s or to a ball. I dearly love to dance and was hoping I might entice you visit Almack’s, that is, with your father of course and allow me to reintroduce you to it. I’m sure you would be swept off your feet by my guidance, given the chance!”

Valentine resented the coloring of her cheeks at this suggestion. “I thank you for your kind invitation, Mr. Johnson. Before my mother’s passing, I was quite fond of dancing in more private settings. I think that Almack’s might be a bit too daunting to me—“

At this, Mr. Randal cleared his throat and started to cough. Valentine felt sorry for the man whose face was reddening and he stood, drinking all his wine suddenly and asking to be forgiven for leaving the table.

“Of course, Mr. Randall, please take your time to collect yourself,” said his host motioning for the footman to follow him with a glass of water.

Valentine’s discomfort only increased at this strange interruption, and she longed to be excused as well. These uninteresting men and unstimulating conversation only made her weary and depressed. But once Mr. Randall’s cough was heard to travel out of earshot, the other suitors took up where they left off. There was nothing for it but to endure.

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Dobbs, the butler, was distracted by a knock on the front door, so Randall was able to slip by him unnoticed to ascend the stairs and dash silently down the hall to the left. His pulse quickened at the sight of a maid turning into a door near the end, but she hadn’t seen him, so he continued noiselessly until he stood before the door to the bedchamber facing the rear garden on the right in the middle of the hall.

There he knocked an almost imperceptible pattern, which was answered from inside by the same. The door was immediately unlocked and Randall, with one more glance to each side, entered, shutting the door quietly behind him.

“Good work, Mr. Bard,” he whispered to the large man dressed in all black, who handed him a black fabric bag.

Bard only nodded, his dark eyes narrow and fingers twitching.

Taking note of the open window and the cut glass near the latch, Randall went immediately to Valentine’s dressing table and began rifling through her jewelry box, taking handfuls of gems and trinkets, bracelets and necklaces, broches and earrings and putting them carelessly in the sack.

The jewelry box empty he growled low. “It’s not here.”

Plunging his hand back in and feeling again for something large and cold, he pulled it out again in frustration.

“Sir, the time,” cautioned Bard in a harsh whisper.

Randall took to the items on the dressing table and pillaged away, stuffing perfume bottles, silver combs, and the like, until he picked up the exquisite Fabergé box and studied the portrait on its lid.

“I wonder,” he whispered to himself, then flipped open the box without hesitation. Inside he saw a lock of silver-streaked blonde hair tied with a pink ribbon, but a gleam from underneath caught his attention.

Shoving aside the silken tress with his adept fingers, he pulled out the prize he sought. A gold ring upon which was mounted a heart shaped ruby the size of small bird’s egg, St. Valentine’s Heart.

Not allowing himself another gloating look, he dropped the ring, box and hair into the bag then stepped to the writing desk, swiftly going through the drawers. Upon discovering nothing there of any real value, he almost stopped before opening the last drawer on the bottom right, feeling the pressure of the seconds ticking down. But with one last flash, he opened the drawer and grabbed its contents, not looking at it before tossing it in the bag and handing it to Bard with a nod.

Then, Randall opened the door cautiously and peered out. The coast was clear. He slipped into the hall and Bard closed the door behind him. Hearing the lock click, he

made his stealthy way down the hall and could hear Dobbs still arguing with the stranger at the door.

Now, if he could only evade the notice of the footman standing near the dining room door, all would be well.

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Valentine tried almost unsuccessfully to stifle a sigh as her father entertained his guests with a list of her virtues supported by anecdotes of her childhood, furthering her already deep embarrassment. While Mr. Smith submitted remarks now and then about how similar their childhoods had been, Mr. Jones laughed too loudly at all the wrong moments, and Mr. Johnson tried to steal back the attention to himself and his social escapades.

At least she was not required to speak for some minutes, leaving her to bemoan inwardly the shallowness of the conversation, and to wonder, as the others seemed not to, at what had happened to Mr. Randall.

Not long after, the man himself returned, much improved after his choking fit, with a new air of felicity about him. She wondered if his improvement in mood was caused by his relief from being able to breathe easier, or if simply being away from the table and its occupants was enough to lighten his spirits.

Her father finally ended his recommendations. Mr. Randall took advantage of the lull and spoke up. "I perceive, Miss Thorndike, that you prefer a quiet life and value your privacy." His face softened as he held her gaze, his deep blue eyes penetrating. "I wonder if you might prefer long walks in the garden and hours spent in a library to dinner parties and promenading in Hyde Park. Am I right?"

Valentine colored and she could feel her shoulders relax a little. "Quite so, Mr. Randall. I am indeed a naturally reserved person. I value time spent in edifying my mind and improving my thoughts to outward displays of fashion and the bright lights of society."

Goodness, she thought. I said exactly what I have wanted to say at last, but her father cleared his throat, reminding her that she should continue to sensor her honesty.

Mr. Randall held her gaze. "Then I speak for myself when I say that I would rather become better acquainted with you in your more natural habitat." With this, Randall turned his attention to Lord Thorndike. "Might I ask your permission, my lord, to escort Miss Thorndike to the new location of the London Library in St. James Square? Surely you have heard of its recent move there from its rooms on Pall Mall."

Valentine's heart quickened as Randall's eyes turned back to hers. "Have you been there yet, Miss Thorndike? I have not visited the new location, but I'm curious to see it myself."

She could hardly believe her ears. The handsome gentleman sitting at the far end of the table had just invited her to the London Library, a place her father would never dream of taking her of his own accord.

"Why, no, Mr. Randall, I have not had the privilege of going there, but I must admit the news of it has had me intrigued.

She hardly took notice of the fallen faces of the other guests as she brightened at Mr. Randall's invitation. Turning to her father, she barely dared to meet his eyes lest he disapprove. "I am agreeable to Mr. Randall's invitation father, if you are."

The lord's brows raised in surprise. "Well, daughter, I am delighted that you have finally approved of one of these gentlemen's offers!"

Valentine's heart ventured a fraction of relief. She, too, was surprised, but hoped she would not regret acquiescing to any invitation at all.

Her father smiled broadly at Mr. Randall and lifted his glass. "I congratulate you, Mr. Randall. I wholeheartedly give my consent and will attend as chaperone for the momentous occasion! I admit that visiting a library is not what I would choose to do with my free time, but in this case, by all means, the London Library it is!"

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Randall watched as the color played on the lady's face and found it almost bewitching. Could a woman as beautiful as Valentine Thorndike truly be as modest and self-effacing as she appeared? It could never be, he scoffed to himself, his long-held contempt for the fairer sex turning the wine in his mouth bitter. She is like all the others he was sure and enjoyed toying with her heart as the dinner ended and the lady took her leave.

Excusing himself from the lord's invitation to retire to his smoking room with the others, Randall had Dobbs fetch him a cab and left the townhouse, heading towards Charing Croft, where he changed cabs and hurried across the Westminster Bridge to his rooms in Southwark, a convenient location for doing business in the West End without the prestige.

Leaving the cab a few blocks away, he strode through the increasing fog to his lodgings, first checking that the hair from his own head had not been disturbed from its place above the door by an intruder. Reassured, Randall unlocked the door and through his gentlemen's trappings of high hat and tailcoat on the stand in the hall, then went to light the fire in his sitting room. After the worst of the dark had been expelled by a few candles, he poured himself a whisky and sat down to take off his black Huntington boots.

After only a few sips, there was a familiar scratch at the door, which he answered, admitting Mr. Bard. They said nothing at first but exchanged satisfied nods before Randall poured hulking man a glass and returned to his chair.

Bard pulled the black sack out from under his substantial coat and handed it to Randall, a cold smile finally lighting his dark face. "A very productive evening, sir. I'd say we made out twice as well as the last time."

Randall did not return the smile but felt the weight of the bag in his hand and swallowed the rest of his liquor. "We shall soon see," he said smoothly then rose and pulled a low table closer to the light of the fire.

"What luck, sir, that the lady didn't wear her mother's ring to dinner with the rest of the set," said Bard, swirling the golden liquid in his glass before swiftly downing it.

"Lucky indeed, Mr. Bard, but we still need to get such a notable gem out of the country before we will have any profit from it," replied Randall, pouring out the booty onto a cloth on the table with a sigh. Something about all that glitter made his heart ache, for he loved the beauty of the gems almost as much as the money he would get for them.

Ignoring all the rest, including the leather book which he placed aside, Randall at once reached for the Faberge box and clicked open the lid. Tossing the lock of hair into

the fire without a thought, he took out the magnificent ring and slide it on his little finger. Leaning near the firelight, the heart of the ruby glowed blood red from within, and Randall's heart beat strong in his chest. "St. Valentine's Heart," he whispered over it, as if calling the stone to life.

Bard left his chair and bent close to see. "Goll," he said reverently. "Would ya look at that beauty—" his voice trailing off in awe.

Randall quickly tucked the ring into his waistcoat pocket and stood to pour two more glasses. "Do not let yourself be so mesmerized by it that you lose your head, Bard. You know our agreement still stands."

Bard took one long look at the jews on the table before taking his filled glass back to his chair. "Ya know ya can trust me, Mr. Randall. If I were going to make a mess of things, I'd have had plenty of opportunity to do it before now."

"Hmmm," Randall hummed. "And if you had, or do, you know the consequences." He pulled his chair a bit closer to the table and began spreading out the pile. Without looking up he said, "Finish your drink, Mr. Bard. It's time to go."

With a low grumble, Bard eyed Randall, then swallowed his whiskey in one go and got to his feet. He stood over Randall and held out his hand. "I'll take my down payment before I go, if ya please, sir."

Randall stood silently and left the room, returning a moment later with a bag full of coins. "Just remember. I don't want to see your face again until I send for you. Not a day sooner."

Bard nodded, clutching the bag with a glint in his eye. "Understood."

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Valentine breathed a heavy sigh after bidding her father and the other gentlemen goodnight. Mr. Randall had fixed the date for their visit to the London Library for the very next day, and after he left her mind was a whirl with what preparations should be made for his return in the early afternoon. What had she done? She could hardly believe she had accepted the man's invitation so readily.

Turning up the stairs, Kitty met her at the landing and joined her as she walked wearily down the hall to her door.

"Kitty, I will be going out tomorrow after dinner. Please help me select a gown for my visit to the London Library with father and Mr. Randall before I retire."

Kitty walked a pace behind, so Valentine only heard the maid gasp and didn't see the shock on the girl's face.

"Very well, Miss," was her only reply, which was fitting, and Valentine nodded in approval.

She retrieved her key from her pocket and gave it to Kitty who unlocked the door and opened it wide for her to enter, but Valentine stopped short on the threshold. First, the cool night breeze wafted around her from the break in the window across the room and she drew a sharp breath, then her eyes darted here and there frantically.

Kitty held her arm out to her mistress, preventing her from proceeding further.

"Oh no! Miss Thorndike!" she nearly shouted in alarm. "There's been an intruder!"

Valentine froze where she was in disbelief. Kitty darted across to the wall near the bed and yanked the bellpull before gently coaxing her charge back out into the hall.

Once there, Kitty shouted for Mr. Dobbs, for anyone, taking her shocked employer by the elbow, encouraging her to remove as quickly as possible to the sitting room.

Unable to speak, Valentine stopped mid stride and shook her head. Turning back just as Mr. Dobbs hurried up the stairs, she darted back to her room, the door still flung wide.

“Mother!” she cried. “I have to find mother’s box!”

Mr. Dobbs and two footmen appeared and invaded the space in alarm. One ran to the broken window while the other searched the wardrobe and under the bed. Whoever had come in had gone out the way he came.

“Miss Thorndike, I beg you madam to allow Wilson to escort you to the safety of the sitting room and allow us to sort this out.” Dobbs was sweating with his haste. “Baker! Run and have someone fetch the constable!”

All the while Valentine searched in vain for her most valued possession, her mother’s box with her portrait and precious lock of hair. She knew the ring it contained was what the thief was after, and her heart did not bleed a drop for it. Only the face and hair of her mother meant anything to her now.

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She sat at the sitting room table alone, weeping while the whole house was in an uproar. The constable had come with some other men. They were searching the grounds, the street, even the attic, and still there was no sign of the thief. Her father and his friends joined in the search, but no one had thought to check in with her to see how she fared.

She could feel her mother’s trinket slipping farther and farther away and new it would be hopeless now she would ever hold it in her hands again. The violation of being robbed of something so sentimental to her cut deep. Oh, why hadn’t they just taken the ring and left her precious box alone and mother’s lock of hair alone?

At last, her father entered and came to her, a strange look of fear in his usually placid face. “Valentine, my dear,” he said, patting her shoulder and taking her hand, “are you alright? What a fright you have had!”

Holding tightly to his hand, she stood and buried her damp face in his chest, an unusual display of affection for them. “Oh father. I am heartbroken over mother’s box. I should have been less careless with it and kept it under lock and key.”

“There, there,” he soothed awkwardly. “I am more grateful that the robbery happened when you were not in your rooms. God knows what would have happened to you if you were there.”

Valentine sniffed and looked up at him. “You don’t they think would have hurt me, do you?” she asked, a new fear striking her heart. “Surely all they wanted was mother’s jewels.”

Her father withdrew his embrace when Dobbs appeared. “Yes, Dobbs?”

“My lord, the constable would like a moment with you and Miss Thorndike. Shall I bring him here, sir?”

Valentine noticed the butler’s ashen color.

“Yes, Dobbs,” replied the lord, “and have tea brought in as well.”

The constable was brief in his interview. He assured them both that the theft of such a recognizable jewel would be executed only by the bravest or brashest of burglars,



for if The St. Valentine's Heart were to turn up on the London market, it would make it easy to track the thief. His guess was that it would be sent overseas where it would be easier to sell. He left after giving her father a firm warning not to allow Valentine to occupy her chamber that night.

Lord Thorndike looked at her with something unfamiliar in his gaze she had never seen there before. He rose, bringing his decanter of brandy and leaned over her tea cup. "Have a little in your tea, Val. It will help calm your nerves."

She watched him pour a little into her cup amazed. He had never done such a thing. Touched by this uncharacteristic gesture, the tears misted her eyes again. "Thank you, father. It may help."

Seating himself close to her on the settee, he hesitated, then laid his arm over her shoulders. "What would I have done if you had been hurt, Valentine, or, or something worse—"

His words caught in his throat and Valentine set down her cup, then lay her golden head on his chest, inexplicably grateful for his comfort. The last time he had been this affectionate was when her mother passed, but he quickly returned to his formal ways.

"Oh father, I am so glad nothing happened to you either."

She felt his chest rise and fall with a heavy sigh. After a pause, he stirred and handed her her cup. "I have been remiss in my duty as a father to see to your safety since your mother left us. I have been careless, and I must rectify that immediately."

Valentine felt the burn of the alcohol laced tea as she swallowed, watching her father's altered face.

He bowed his head and said gravely. "I know I have been distracted and perhaps too insistent that you leave mourning your mother too quickly, Val, but it pains me so to see you so melancholy and secluded, my dear. Please forgive me if I have pushed you too hard. I am only concerned for your future and happiness."

Her heart throbbed with love at his words. So, this is why he had been so adamant that she find a suitor. "I know, father, but I am having such difficulty with mother's absence, and you know I am not like other girls who love to flit about society and be seen at balls. All I want is a quiet place to study and a quiet way to serve others. Most of the men in London I've met are all so vain and shallow."

Her father looked at her hard. "But daughter. I am concerned for your future. What will become of you if something should happen to me? It is inevitable that I will leave you, and if I do not do my duty to secure you a husband while you are young, then—"

"Then I would be lonely for you, as I am mother," Valentine interrupted. "But you do not wish me to be unhappily wed either, do you?"

Sighing again, the lord shook his head in resignation. "No, my dear. I wouldn't, but you must make at least some effort to come out of your shell and meet people. Will you try, for me?"

His plea went straight to the soft place in her chest, and she braved a little smile. "I will try, father. For you."

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Randall stood at his shaving mirror when there was a knock at his door. He grunted and wiped his blade but kept it in his hand as he strode to answer. An envelope had been slipped under the door. It was a note from Lord Thorndike, making his apologies about having to cancel their outing to the London Library that afternoon due to his daughter's room being burgled during their dinner the night before.

Smiling contentedly, he threw the paper on the table and went back to his toilet. Poor little Valentine, he thought. He had probably scared her half silly.

He sat with his morning coffee near the fire, sorting again through Valentine's jewelry and estimating their worth when the leather-bound journal he set aside last night caught his eye. Opening the cover, he sat back in his chair, ready to entertain himself for the morning with the sniveling writings of a weepy heiress.

The clock startled him out of his reading an hour later and he looked up. He hadn't noticed his foot going to sleep as he sat, riveted by the words he read. This was no insipid, shallow diary of an uneducated girl interested only in dresses and who she danced with at the last ball, but a memoire, beautifully written, with passion and a view of the world reflecting a keen mind and brilliant eye.

Downing his cold coffee, he stood. This girl was so completely unlike the women he knew and scorned. This one may be worth toying with a little more, if only to satisfy himself that her writings were not just some accidental genius, but if there really was a woman capable of such lofty thoughts behind that exquisitely lovely face.

Randall laughed out loud to himself. "Why not have a little fun with the pretty Valentine Thorndike before heading off to Paris to sell her priceless ring. I haven't had a fling in a long time."

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"Valentine," her father called from the hall while she sat near the fire in one of the guest rooms of the house in the opposite wing from her room. "May I speak to you, dear?"

She opened the door and smiled, so glad he had come to check in on her. Lord Thorndike's brow was knit as he looked her over. To her surprise, he offered his arm and slowly walked down the hall.

"It seems we have a visitor," he said sheepishly. "Mr. Theodore Randall has come to see about us after he received my note cancelling our engagement this afternoon."

Valentine paused her steps. "Oh dear. Must I see him today, father? Cannot you ask him to come another time?" She was already regretting her promise to her father to try and be more social.

The lord hesitated. "I will do so, if that is what you wish, but the man seems to be genuinely upset about what has happened and has brought you a, ur, gift, you see—"

"A gift?" Valentine raised her perfect blonde brows. "What kind of gift, father? Is it appropriate for him to be giving me gifts at a time like this?"

"That is why I came to fetch you myself. You really must see this to believe it!"

Her curiosity overruled her caution, and she allowed her father to take her to the parlor where Mr. Randall stood, his strong back facing them as he looked at the painted porcelain clock on the mantel. He turned at her greeting, bowing with practiced grace and taking her offered hand.

Did she detect relief in his dark blue eyes?

“I am sorry to intrude on you like this, Miss Thorndike, but after hearing the harrowing news of your terrible experience last night, I could not rest until I had seen with my own eyes that you are alright and to bring you something to distract you from this most egregious violation of your privacy, not to mention your inexcusable loss.”

Valentine was a bit taken aback by his gushing greeting. “I am grateful for your concern, Mr. Randall, but I assure you that am not harmed, only a bit shaken.”

He smiled warmly down upon her, for he was considerably taller. “I am extremely relieved to hear it from your own lips, madam.” Turning, he motioned her towards the table nearby. “Since you are not going to the London Library with me today, I thought I would bring some of the library to you. I hope you will lose yourself in some of these books to take your mind off this tragedy.”

Valentine gasped. There were two tall piles of books stacked on the lace tablecloth, some old, some new, and she couldn’t help by reach out and stroke their bindings, noticing their various titles. “Oh Mr. Randall! This is too much! I cannot possibly accept so many--“

Randall went around the table to face her, waving his hand. “No, no, Miss Thorndike, I do not wish to misrepresent myself. These books are not gifts, but loans taken from the library on my account. I hope I have chosen well for you.”

She was beside herself and could hardly reply. “I am delighted, sir,” she finally breathed with a sweet smile. “I am truly touched and give you my sincerest thanks,” she added, her hand over her heart.

“To see that lovely smile on your face is thanks indeed, Miss Thorndike.” Bowing to her then turning to her father, Mr. Randall bowed again. “I will take my leave, my lord, and thank you both for seeing me after your ordeal.” He strode towards the door then faced them again. “Might I impose on you again in a day or two, just to see how you are and how you are getting on with your reading?”

Though he addressed them both, Valentine noticed his eyes never left hers. She looked to her father, who only nodded to her. Swallowing, she ventured, “Yes, Mr. Randall. We shall look forward to seeing you again.”

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Every day for the next week, Randall would read another passage in the heiress’s journal, mesmerized by her skill with words and thoughts, so much so that he began taking notes on things she expressed, a turn of a phrase or line of longing, then work out how he would use this knowledge to draw her closer to him in his daily visits, which grew longer by the day.

By the time the end of a fortnight came, he had spent so much time in her company that he almost lost track of the time himself, finding each session with her and his hidden knowledge of her inner thoughts more intriguing than the last. She was proving that her writing was indeed genuine, her thoughts unique and intelligent, and each hour spent in the aura of her beauty and fine mind kept him entranced with the game he was playing.

When she was finally agreeable to leaving the townhouse and accompanying him to the London Library, they had become fairly well acquainted, at least he was with her, and she with the version of himself he had decided to play. His portrayal of the deep

thinking and unassuming gentleman not only enamored by her beauty but by her mind was hitting its mark.

His evenings were spent disassembling her jewelry and separating the gems. Diamonds, rubies, pearls, sapphires, and emeralds were sold off a few at a time to keep him and his underground connections from drawing too much attention. Though Mr. Bard was impatient for his ultimate share of the sale of St. Valentine's Heart, Randall knew that patience was the key, and the longer he waited to travel and sell it, the better the chances of never being caught.

Besides, he thought to himself, I'm enjoying this little game of mine as it helps to pass the time. Still, Bard was sending him messages, putting on the pressure to either sell the ruby or at least pursue their next mark, the Lady Asterby's famous five carat blue diamond.

After the third week, Randall had yet to finish Valentine's journal, savoring each page, fascinated by her wit and creative spirit. Even more, he was delighted by his ability to use her brilliance to his own advantage and loved the look of deep understanding she gave him when he said something so near to her own private thoughts. She was falling in love with him, and he knew it.

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It had taken the better part of the last three weeks to feel comfortable sleeping in her own bedchamber, but her father had assured her that the new windows and locks he had installed were the strongest available, and the constable had put another man on the beat covering their street and alleyway both day and night. "Besides," he told her. "There is little chance that another break-in would be attempted, especially since the house was watched more closely now and the ruby had already been taken."

Valentine found herself actually humming as she ascended the stairs. Mr. Randall had invited her and her father to the theatre that night to see Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, and there was no other playwright whose work she would be interested in going out in public to see.

Entering her bedchamber, she paused at the wardrobe and opened the doors with a wistful sigh, thinking about Mr. Randall and their latest conversation about Mr. Shakespeare's poetry. They were so like-minded in everything, she thought it uncanny, but extremely satisfying.

Kitty knocked and entered, she too with a smile on her face. She curtsied to her mistress, holding something behind her back.

"Look, Miss! These just came for you!" she announced with glee, bringing out a magnificent bouquet of long-stemmed blood red roses. "I'll just set them here and go fetch a vase!"

Valentine lifted the flowers, touching the cool soft petals to her lips as her heart beat hard in her chest. A card was tucked into the fold of thin paper and satin ribbon binding them together. Kitty returned with the vase just as she was reading the note.

"For the truest of hearts, from your greatest admirer. TR."

She caught the look on her flushed face in the mirror and her pulse quickened. Was there ever such a man as Theodore Randall? She was sure there was not.

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As he stood in the entryway waiting for his guests to appear, Randall went over and over the last entry he had just read in Valentine's journal before leaving his flat: "Dear God, how I wish I had been born plain and simple, for only then would I find an honest man who would love me for my heart and mind and not for my beauty, or my father's fortune. But, alas, I am resigned within myself that there will never be such a love for me."

Randall's heart stopped still for the first time in his life when Valentine Thorndike glided down the stairs in a rose-pink evening gown, looking more like a goddess than a mere mortal woman. Her beauty took his breath away, and the way her eyes pierced through the wall of his guarded heart almost made him gasp aloud. Alarmed at the fault in his carefully buttressed armor, he was unable to keep the honest admiration out of his gaze.

Steady man, steady, he admonished himself, but the whole evening in the presence of the intelligent, witty, dazzling woman beside him kept poking at the hole in his defenses.

Valentine leaned ever so slightly nearer to him as Romeo spoke of his love to his fair Juliet on the stage, her eyes lowered and thick lashes casting shadows on her petal soft cheeks. Knowing in his own mind and heart that her charms were wholesome and genuine, her feelings for him honest and pure, he gritted his teeth and fought to resist the power that was overtaking him, the realization that not all women were untrue as he had schooled himself long ago to believe. This one, this rare jewel among gems, might be his undoing.

After hearing Shakespeare's masterful descriptions of love and loyalty, by the time the lovers on the stage lay dead in each other's arms and he saw Valentine's tears streaming down her angelic face, Theodore Randall was a different man.

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Valentine's heart was full to overflowing by the end of the play. Mr. Randall seemed to sense the almost holiness of her mood and spoke little during the carriage ride home. But when he took her hand to kiss it in parting, his gaze penetrated hers.

"Thank you ever so much for the lovely evening, Mr. Randal," she all but whispered. "I can't remember the last time I enjoyed an outing so much."

"Nor I," he replied in a husky tone. "And I beg you to call me Theodore."  
He was gone before she could respond.

"Well, well," her father called her attention away from staring at the door Randall had just exited. Taking her elbow, he guided her into the parlor to a chair beside the fire. "I do believe Mr. Randall has found a way into my daughter's ever guarded heart."

Valentine blushed as her father sat opposite her. "Oh father," she breathed, "He is almost too good to be true."

"Indeed," he sighed, his brows pinching as she leaned back and studied her. "I have known Mr. Randall only the last 3 months or so. He seems to run in all the right circles, and I have confirmed that his parents were well bred, though they died young, and his older brother inherited the estate. Evidently, he was shipped off to boarding

school for most of his upbringing, though his manners are quite polished, and he seems an amiable enough fellow.”

Valentine could see a new hesitancy in her father’s eyes. “But there is something that gives you cause for pause, father. Please tell me what it is. I don’t want my eyes to be blinded by my heart.”

Lord Thorndike drew a long breath. “That’s just it, my dear. I cannot explain my sudden reservation about him. He has done nothing to cause me doubt, but there’s something niggling me in the back of my mind I cannot put into words.”

Valentine looked into the fire, a battle ensuing inside. Her attraction to Mr. Randall had overwhelmed her heart, and his conversation, his manner, his thoughts so aligned with hers she couldn’t help but become attached to him in mind and spirit as well. But if her father, whose fervent wish was for her to find a good husband was having reservations, shouldn’t she heed his intuition, at least until she and her father were both satisfied that nothing was amiss?

At last, she turned to him. “I respect your judgement in this father. It would be folly to give my heart completely to Mr. Randall until you are satisfied there is not an impediment.”

She rose, as did he, and kissed his aging cheek. “Good night, father.”

He looked at her gravely. “I am sorry to disappoint you, Val, but perhaps we should proceed with caution. Besides, there is no hurry. If Mr. Randall is the man we hope he is, it will all be confirmed in due time.”

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Randall’s chest thrummed with some power he had never felt before. All the way home, he fought to get hold of himself, but the sting of tears insisted on pressing against his eyes, a sensation completely new to him. What was the matter with him? Was he going mad?

Still, though he felt shaken to the core, there was an emergence of a foreign strength welling up inside him, a vigor and expansion of energy that went far beyond anything in his experience up to this moment. By the time the cab drew up to corner of his street, he had succumbed. He was in love.

Something had lightened in his chest, and he took deep, full breaths on his way up the street, as if until now he had been holding it. It was an intoxicating feeling, like a man might feel when released from a lifetime in a prison cell.

He paused at the foot of the stairs with a jolting thought. But I am not true. I am not the man she thinks I am. I have harmed her egregiously. I do not deserve her.

His reverie was broken suddenly when he reached his door and found Mr. Bard waiting for him, dark and silent.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Bard? I thought I told you to stay away until I sent for you.” Shoving his key into the lock, even his attempt to sound fierce and annoyed was softened by his recent conversion.

Mr. Bard followed him inside without a word, watching his every move like a cat about to pounce. “Well,” Randall grumbled, “Stop staring at me and tell me why you’ve come.”

Refusing the chair Randall gestured to opposite him, Bard stood in the flickering glow of candle light, the white of his black eyes flashing. “Ya told me ya would be in

Paris by now, and yet I hear ya have yet to sail. Seems ya've been having a fling with the Miss Thorndike and been waistin' yer time, nay, my time," with this, Bard stuck his thumb in his chest, "just to have a little fun at my expense."

Randall was uneasy with Bard's tone. He was usually able to keep the beast in check, but there was something about the cold fire in his eyes that could be too wild to tame.

He strode casually to his whiskey decanter and poured two glasses. Returning, he offered one to Bard, but was waved off. "I didn't come here to have a nice little chat, Mr. Randall. I came here for the ruby."

Randall chuckled low and calmly took his seat, though inwardly he steeled himself for battle. "That's very funny, Bard. You know I wouldn't keep such a treasure here. I have it in safe keeping and am almost ready to leave for France. There are only a few loose ends to tie up, that's all."

Bard stepped closer to him than he liked, his stinking hulk towering over him. "I don't think ya heard me right, Randall. I came here for the jewel and you're going to give it to me, right now."

Randall anticipated Bard's lunge and flung himself sideways out of the chair. Bard stumbled forward and Randall took advantage of the fraction of a second to run to the hall in pursuit of the pistol he had hidden by the door.

Bard was after him, and just before Randall was able to aim, Bard crushed him with his full weight against the door, his massive hands wrenching the gun from his hands.

Now Bard stood back, his own pistol aimed at his head. Randall stood panting with his back to the door, his hands raised.

In that moment, he was suddenly sad. Had Bard threatened his life any night before this, he doubted he would have even cared. But now, his heart beat madly in his chest that he had something worth living for, worth fighting for, that the sweet taste of pure love was something he wanted to taste again.

Bard laughed low as he stood helpless. "Now, yer going to tell me where that ruby is, or I'm going to shoot you and find it anyways."

Trying desperately to slow his breaths, Randall looked the man dead in the eye and told the truth. "I have already told you, Bard, it is not here. You can search the entire place. You will not find it."

"Prove it!," Bard barked. "Show me yer safe, now!"

Randall lowered his hands a bit. "Alright, it's in the bedchamber. Just take it easy now. I'll show you."

Bard motioned with the pistol and Randall cautiously led the way. Lighting a candle on the mantel, he carefully removed the landscape painting above the cold fireplace and set it aside. There in the wall was a small safe.

Hovering close, Bard murmured as Randall withdrew a key from his pocket and opened the metal door. Inside was the black bag, a stack of notes, and the Fabergé box. Bard motioned Randall aside and kept one eye on Randall as he removed the sack, set the box on the mantel, and stuffed the money in his pocket. Moving to the bed, he dumped the contents of the bag on the bed, his beefy fingers stirring through the remains of the Valentine's jewels.

Bard's face filled with rage. "Where is it! Give it to me or I'll shoot ya like a dog!"

Randall could only hope that one of his neighbors heard the man's shouts and would investigate, but as Bard came around the bed and nearly touched the pistol to his temple, he flung up his hands and went down on his knees. "Please, Bard! I tell you; it isn't here."

The cold metal of the barrel was thrust under his chin and Bard glared at him. "Then where is it?" he seethed through clenched teeth.

"It is in a bank deposit box in St. James Square. There is no way for you to get to it without me."

His head snapped back and hit the wall as Bard landed a punch to his left cheek. Then Bard stood back, a crooked smile on his unshaven face. "Well then, I shall just have to take matters into my own hands. I'm leaving ya here tonight, Mr. Randall, so I can make sure yer little distraction doesn't distract you anymore. Then tomorrow morning, you and I'll make a little visit to the bank and be off to Paris."

Bard leaned close and Randall could smell his putrid breath. "Better start packing."

Then, the world went black.

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Valentine could hardly sleep. She tossed and turned like the thoughts in her head, searching her memories of Theodore Randall for any sign of dishonesty, but nothing stood out. He had been a perfect gentleman, thoughtful and courteous in every way, and how her heart soared again as she replayed every look, every word, every hour spent together as kindred spirits, his thoughts and opinions aligning with hers to naturally, so perfectly.

But perhaps too perfectly. Yet, how could that be? He could not be reading her mind, but how else would he know her so intimately that he could match her thought for thought as he did?

And what if there was no deceit in him? Nothing but an honest heart and pure intentions? This she would allow herself to revel in, until her father's reticence and concern crept back into her thoughts. Sleep evaded her until she finally surrendered the questions until morning.

She awoke with a start, a huge, heavy hand over her mouth and moist, hot breath in her ear. "Good evening, Miss Thorndike. How lovely to find you in your room tonight. The last time I was here we didn't have the pleasure of meeting."

Her heart raced as she tried to scream, scratching at the man's face in sheer panic. Her efforts were answered with a hard slap to the face as the man pulled off her coverlet and hoisted his enormous body on top of her, crushing her under his immense weight. She couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't—"

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Randall pushed his way back to the light, back to the bedchamber floor where he had fallen, his temple throbbing. Touching his head, his hand felt the warm, sticky trickle of blood, but it was not a deep cut. Pulling himself to his feet next to the bed, he noticed that the candle on the mantel had not burned much lower than he remembered when lighting it.



What had Bard said? He fought to pull his thoughts together, still blurred from the blow. He said he would take make sure his little distraction didn't distract him anymore. Randall's mind cleared instantly. Valentine.

He ran to the door and found it locked, the key from his coat pocket missing. Thank God he had a spare. Without a moment to lose, Randall dashed to the sitting room and grabbed Valentine's journal, then to his desk to collect spare key and another pistol from the desk drawer. He grabbed his coat and turned the key in the lock, then stopped short, plunging back into the bedchamber to snatch the beautiful box from the mantel.

Running as fast as his feet could carry him, he found a rare cab just two blocks away and gave the address to Lord Thorndike's, then sat back to catch his breath, even to pray. If only he could get there before Bard did his worst. He had to get there, he must.

The only way he would catch up to Bard was if the man had not gone directly to the Thorndike's house. With all the loot he now carried in his pockets, there was a chance he would have stopped somewhere to hide the jewels before heading there. It was Randall's only hope.

When he thought of Valentine in the hands of that monster, he nearly lost his mind. Pounding on the roof of the cab, he shouted for the driver to go as fast as he could.

The cab stopped at the entrance to the alley behind the row of stately townhouses. He ran to the back of the house next door and caught hold of the ironwork separating the back gardens and climbed as quickly as his limbs would move, his head still spinning from Bard's blow. He caught sight of the open window as he mounted the long gable under Valentine's window and nearly fell in his haste to traverse the ridge.

Dear God, what would he find?

He silently slipped in the open window, just as Bard lay his hulking body on top of the precious woman in the bed. Thank God she was still alive! Stepping quickly to hold the barrel to Bard's temple, he pulled back the cock.

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Just as Valentine thought she might be smothered to death, the man's body moved off her, freeing her mouth. Gasping for air she sat up straight, a familiar voice speaking soft and low, and a familiar face profiled in the moonlight.

"Theodore!" she cried, racing to stand behind him as he aimed a pistol at the giant's head. His free hand reached behind him to pull her close. She wrapped her trembling arms around his waist. "Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

"Are you alright, Valentine?" Randall whispered and she could hear the fear in his voice.

"I am," was all she could say, then pressed her face into the strength of his back as she hugged him tight.

"Thank God," he breathed, taking her hand from his chest and pressing it to his lips. "I want you to crawl across your bed and run to the door. Go fetch your father and Dobbs. Have them send for the constable at once."

"But I don't want to leave you with this man, Theodore, he may hurt you and I couldn't live with myself if he did," she begged.

“It’s alright,” he soothed. “Now go quickly.”

He pulled her hand from him, and she did as he bid, throwing her dressing gown around her slender shoulders as she raced from the room and ran to the opposite wing of the house.

“Father! Father!” she shouted, pounding on his door in panic.

“What is it, my dear? What has happened?” he called after her as she flew down the hall shouting for Dobbs.

Explaining to them as quickly as she could, the footmen were aroused and the constable sent for, then Valentine urged her father to collect his pistol and go to help Theodore. “His life is in danger father! He saved my life!”

After emerging from his office armed, Lord Thorndike insisted that she stay in the parlor until help arrived and the situation was in hand, but Valentine couldn’t take the suspense and ran up behind her father just as he entered her room.

Theodore was alone; the dreadful man was gone.

“Randall! What has happened man? Where is the burglar?” huffed Lord Thorndike, lowering his pistol.

Laying his own gun on the bed, Randall rushed to Valentine who rushed to meet him. “Are you alright, my dear? Did he hurt you? Are you sure?”

Valentine could not help herself. She threw herself into his arms and clung for dear life. “Are you safe, Theodore? Are you truly safe?”

He returned her embrace and she felt him kissing the top of her head over and over.

“Ahem,” her father cleared his throat loudly and patted them both on the shoulder. “I believe we should adjourn to the sitting room. I’ll lock this door until the constable comes.”

Just then the constable and his men came crashing down the hall, but the lord raised his hands to slow them. “I believe the burglar is no longer in the house gentlemen. You must search for a giant of a man in dark clothing outside. I expect you to find the brut constable!”

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Randall found himself sitting opposite the parlor room fire from the only woman he had ever loved. They were alone, though the door was open. Lord Thorndike and the staff were all rushing about, searching the house as before, to make certain the house was secure and there were no other intruders.

He was glad to be alone with her, to feel the grace of her presence with him, if even for the last time. They had been served tea, and sat in a communal silence, gazing at each other from time to time, basking in the glow of shared gratitude.

Finally, Randall stood and stepped to the door, looking down the hall both ways, then closing the door half way. He returned to pull his chair closer to hers, almost close enough to reach out for her hand.

“Valentine,” he began, then paused to swallow back the huge rock in his throat, glancing into the fire. “There is something I must confess to you.”

He saw in her face the hope in heart. Was she hoping he would confess his love for her?

She nodded for him to continue.

Randall looked down, avoiding her eyes, this was the most painful thing he had ever had to do in his life, finally be an honest man, and lose the love of his life.

“I am not the man you think me to be.”

Her chest rose and fell. “What can you mean, Theodore?”

He shifted in his chair, sitting on its edge. “Has it occurred to you yet how I came to be there, in your bedchamber, at just the right time to rescue you?”

Her brow crimped slightly at his question. She did not immediately answer but took a moment to consider. Finally, a sliver of light dawned in her eyes.

“Somehow you knew that man was coming here, and what he meant to do,” she said calmly.

Randall nodded slowly. “You are correct. I know the man, and how he was able to gain access to your window.” He paused again, giving her time to process.

She placed her cup and saucer on the table beside her and looked down at her hands in her lap. “Then, you know that he is the one who broke into my room before...” her voice trailed off and he could see the pieces of a puzzle began to fall into place for her.

He took a deep breath, then reached into each of his coat pockets on both sides. “These belong to you,” he said gravely, extending his hands. Before her, he held out her journal with one, and her mother’s portrait box with the other.

Valentine’s face displayed the shattering of her heart as she gathered her treasures into her arms. “I don’t understand,” she cried softly. Looking into his eyes with disbelief, she whispered, “But why?”

Randall went to his knees before her, though he did not touch her. “Because I am a wicked man.”

“But you made me love you, Theodore.” Her voice tore him like a blade. “You stole my heart like you stole my mother’s treasures!”

He raised his hand, “I know,” said. “That is the truth, Valentine, but I want you to know something, something very important—”

She flinched and pulled back in her chair. “I need not know anymore, sir. You have used my own words to inflict the worst kind of harm to me. What kind of a man are you?”

The look of horror on his face was unbearable, but he forced himself to face her and say what he must.

“I will not in any way attempt to justify my actions towards you, but you must know that by meeting you, reading your thoughts and hopes and dreams, your brilliant heart on display in such a secret way, then knowing that you really are all that you have expressed, that your heart is genuine and pure—”

She held up her hands. “Stop! I will listen to no more of your lies!”

“But you have changed me, Valentine. I kneel before you now a changed man because of you, I have known you like no other, and I am undone.”

How he longed to reach for her, to take her into his arms again as she had willingly allowed him to not moments before, but he restrained himself, knowing the sacrifices he must now make.

She hugged her treasures to her chest and wept. How could he have broken this precious woman’s heart?

“I swear to you I am a different man now because I have seen and known your heart. I am broken, I am undone, all because I could not help but love you.”

The door was pushed open, and Lord Thorndike entered quickly followed by the constable and his men. The lord rushed to his daughter's side and glowered down with rage at Randall, still on his knees before her.

"On your feet, Randall," barked the constable. "You're under arrest for the theft of St. Valentine's Heart and other valuables stolen from this house!"

He rose slowly, his eyes never leaving her, with his hands behind his back. As he was clasped in irons, she finally stood to face him, supported by her father, the pain of his betrayal in her lovely eyes.

With one last pleading breath he said, "I beg of you, dear lady, not to close off your heart to all men because of me. It is because I walled off my own heart to all women that I became the devil I was. Please, whatever you do, Valentine, you must love again."

He tore his eyes from hers then, never to see her again.

THE END