



THE LEDGER OF  
SAINT VALENTINE

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THE LEDGER OF SAINT VALENTINE

A Southern Gothic Holiday Horror

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For those who know some debts aren't paid in blood—  
but in truth.

## FOREWORD

To whoever opened this on a day meant for hearts and promises—thank you.

Stories like this don't come from passion or romance. They come from the spaces in between. From kitchens where no one argues anymore. From hands that still touch but don't linger. From the quiet understanding that something once said out loud has learned to stay unspoken.

Valentine's Day is supposed to be proof. Cards. Flowers. Words pressed into paper so they don't have to be said again. But some of us grew up knowing love doesn't always leave marks you can see. Sometimes it fades so slowly it feels like peace. Sometimes the damage is done by what never happens at all.

This story came from that place—where affection becomes habit, where silence starts to count, where absence weighs something whether we admit it or not.

So here's my offering to you: a small account of what gets noticed when we stop looking away. Not a warning. Not a judgment. Just a reminder that even the gentlest seasons keep their own ledgers.

Read it carefully.

And if you find yourself thinking we're fine tonight—  
make sure you know what you mean.

*Anthony Kincaid*

# THE LEDGER OF SAINT VALENTINE

By Anthony Kincaid





## THE REMINDER

(ABSENCE)

February in Cypress Parish wasn't cold. It was damp in a way that sank into things and stayed. The gray lived low—clinging to windshields, slicking the oak leaves until they shone black as old coins at the bottom of a creek. The air smelled like wet pine and something sweet that had no business blooming yet, a perfume already leaning toward rot.

Valentine's Day arrived without announcement. In town, faded paper hearts sagged in the Piggly Wiggly windows, curling at the edges. By register three, a bouquet of roses slumped inside cloudy cellophane, petals bruised where fingers had tested their firmness and moved on. The whole thing felt less like a celebration than a reflex the town hadn't quite let go of.

At home, there was no card.

She noticed over her morning coffee. The kitchen table was bare except for her mug and a scatter of toast crumbs. No envelope propped against the sugar bowl. No glitter, no red ink trying too hard. Across from her, Mark scrolled through the news

on his tablet, thumb moving in patient, practiced arcs. He didn't look up. He didn't pause. He didn't say he'd forgotten, or that he'd fix it later. The day simply continued, unmarked.

That was the part that hurt.

It hadn't registered as a mistake.

An argument would have been heat—proof of friction. This was cooler than that. Smooth. Settled. Like a stone worn round by water that had been flowing around it for years.

At the store, buying milk they didn't need just to give the day a task, the teenage cashier rang her up and glanced at her left hand. The girl hesitated, then said, "Happy... Valentine's," the words landing unsure, like she wasn't certain they applied. In the next aisle, an old man guided his wife by the elbow, her fingers tucked into the bend of his arm as if the world required that kind of balance. Outside, taped crooked to a power pole, a child's construction-paper heart flapped in the mist, rain-spotted and coming loose—an apology meant for someone who never drove that road anymore.

She sat in her idling car when she got home, heater breathing lukewarm air onto her knees, and let it settle.

This wasn't new.

The promotion she'd mentioned twice. The stories at parties that passed over her head without slowing. The way silence had learned her shape and grown comfortable with it. Valentine's Day wasn't the injury—it was the paperwork. The moment the neglect became official, stamped and filed by the utterly ordinary peace of the day.

There had been no fight because there had never been a battlefield.

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## THE ACCOUNTING

(THE TOWN KNOWS)

The bruise appeared three days later, on a Tuesday, which felt right somehow. She noticed it while toweling off after her shower—a faint, yellowed bloom just below her collarbone. When she pressed it, a dull ache answered from deeper in her chest, the same ache she'd woken with that morning and dismissed as nothing.

The mark wasn't angry.

It wasn't the violent splash of a collision or a fall. It had shape. Four faint ovals above her heart, and opposite them a smudged thumbprint. The ghost of a hand. Not squeezing. Not striking. Just holding on longer than it should have.

She stood in the bathroom while the mirror fogged, skin prickling in the cool air. She hadn't fallen. Mark hadn't touched her—not like that. Lately he barely touched her at all, a peck on the cheek that functioned more like punctuation than speech. Yet here was proof of contact all the same.

A receipt.

It had started with the cards. Digging through the junk drawer for a spare charger, her fingers brushed against the squared edges of old cardstock. Three Valentine cards, forgotten but intact. She sat on the kitchen floor and opened them one by one.

His handwriting, years ago.

2012. 2013. 2014.

*To my girl.*

*Love you always.*

But the ink had bled through the cheap paper, the words swollen and blurred until they were nothing but blue shapes, meaningless and familiar all at once. In one envelope she found a dried rosebud, once red, carefully pressed. She set it on the windowsill and forgot about it.

By morning it had darkened to the color of old blood. By afternoon it was black. When she picked it up, it crumbled at the stem and fell apart between her fingers.

Still, she didn't feel afraid. Not yet.

Only unsettled—like she'd missed a step in the dark and her body was still waiting for the floor to appear.

At the Piggly Wiggly, buying peroxide she didn't need, she landed in Mrs. Thibodeaux's line. Mrs. Thibodeaux had been ringing up groceries in Cypress Parish for as long as anyone could remember. Her hands moved with the efficiency of habit, but they paused as she bagged the bottle.

"You alright, cher?" she asked, eyes fixed on the register.

"Just a bruise," she said, the lie slipping out smoothly. She laughed, soft and dismissive. "Woke up with it. Must've bumped something in my sleep."

Mrs. Thibodeaux nodded once. Her eyes lifted then—flat, knowing.

“Well,” she said, passing the bag across the counter, her voice dry as dust, “at least it ain’t Redcoat weather.”

She turned immediately to the next customer.

“Paper or plastic, sugar?”

That was it.

No explanation. No pause. The phrase settled into the space between the gum rack and the tabloids, heavy as a stone dropped into water. *Redcoat weather*. It meant nothing to her.

Walking back to her car, she understood the shape of it. Valentines was lighter than Christmas. Smaller. Quieter. A minor date on the ledger. But a debt all the same.

And Cypress Parish, she was learning, kept careful accounts.

The rule had been stated, not explained.

The accounting had begun.

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## **THE PRESSURE**

(CHOICE NARROWS)

At night, the house began to feel occupied.

Not invaded. Not threatened. Just... attended.

The floorboards popped softly, like knuckles cracking in another room. The hallway air thickened, resisting her passage as if she were moving through shallow water.

Some nights she woke at three with the certainty that something had just settled into the armchair by the window—not to watch her, exactly, but to listen. To wait.

The bruise returned.

It hadn't faded so much as renewed itself, the edges darkening into a deeper purple. The skin above it was warm—unnaturally so—like it held a low fever of its own. It didn't hurt more, but it pulsed, patient and steady, keeping time with her heart. Less an injury than a signal. She hid it beneath high collars, but the warmth bled through the fabric, persistent as memory.

The feeling wasn't fear.

It was expectation.

Valentine's had asked its question. The answer was late.

She tried, then, to bridge the gap in the one place it should have been simplest. One evening, as Mark sat scrolling through his phone, she rested her hand on his arm.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. “With us?”

He looked up, genuinely puzzled, concern creasing his brow. He covered her hand with his—cool, dry skin—and smiled.

“Of course we are. We're fine.”

He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze and went back to his screen.

*We're fine.*

The words settled over her like a heavy blanket, warm enough to smother. And she understood, with a sudden, glacial clarity, that this was the lie the town despised most—not anger, not betrayal, but refusal. The insistence that the ledger was balanced when the ink was still bleeding.

Confirmation came quietly.

At the library, while reshelving a book on local flora, she found herself beside old Mr. Guidry, who came every Thursday to read the papers. He spoke without looking at her, his voice a papery rustle.

“My aunt Imogene,” he said, as if picking up a conversation left hanging years ago.

“Married a man who loved the show of it. Flowers. Smiles. Empty chairs at supper.”

He turned a page.

“One year she made a scene. Demanded he declare his love in front of God and everybody.” Mr. Guidry shook his head. “House burned that fall. Clean to the studs. He left town. She finished her life in a trailer by the swamp.”

He traced a headline with one finger.

“Then there was Sarah LeBlanc. Her husband just... vanished. Like fog lifting. After the funeral, she stood on her porch and said, “This house is empty, and so am I.””

He finally looked at her, eyes cloudy but sharp.

“House is still standing,” he said. “She’s still in it. Alone, sure. But standing.”

He folded the paper with a snap and gathered his coat.

“Love don’t fade, cher,” he said softly. “It accumulates.”

The truth crystallized then—hard, undeniable. Cypress Parish wasn’t punishing the absence of love. It was enforcing a law. Unacknowledged feeling didn’t disappear. It collected. It pressed into walls, settled into bones, waited.

The choice was no longer about marriage.

It was about payment.

**Confront.** Demand love. Force the performance. Prove the balance. But forced affection was counterfeit currency, and the town had no mercy for false coin. Those who demanded love lost everything.

**Confess.** Speak the truth aloud—to Mark, to the house, to whatever listened in the dark. *I am lonely. This is empty.* Truth might spare the structure. But the price was written in Sarah LeBlanc’s porch light: survival, alone.

**Do nothing.** Keep saying *we’re fine*. Let the pressure rise. Let the town—with its bruising grip and whispering floors—settle the account itself.

That was the path of the unclaimed debt.

And Cypress Parish always collected.

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## THE TRANSACTION

(TRUTH PAID)

By Valentine's Night, the air was no longer damp. It had turned liquid.

It clung to her skin, filmed the windows, made every breath feel swallowed rather than taken. The house had become a bell jar, sealed tight, the pressure inside it wound to its limit.

She sat on the edge of the bed long after Mark drifted into his easy, untroubled sleep. The bruise on her chest burned like a live coal, its warmth bleeding through the thin cotton of her nightgown. The presence she had sensed for weeks was no longer pacing hallways or waiting in chairs.

It was here.

A weight settled squarely over her heart—not crushing, not violent. Inescapable. Like a hand laid flat and firm, claiming its place. Cool breath stirred the hair near her ear, carrying the scent of moss and old water. It was not cruel.

It was patient.

The final notice.

Fear had burned itself out. What remained was clarity, sharp and merciless. The town did not want a performance. It did not want blood. It wanted the thing she had hidden behind *we're fine*—the truth she had kept pressed and silent.

She did not look at Mark.

She spoke to the listening dark.

“I was lonely while married.”

Her voice barely disturbed the sheets.

It was not an accusation. It carried no heat, no blame. Just fact. Plain and heavy as a stone lifted from a riverbed.

*I was lonely. While married.*

The response was immediate.

The weight vanished. The thick pressure in the room released all at once, like a door opening soundlessly onto open air. The cool breath withdrew. What remained was the ordinary smell of the bedroom—and the ringing quiet that follows a bell long after it stops swinging.

In that silence, she felt the town turn its attention elsewhere.

She slept, then. A sleep she had forgotten.

Not the restless half-sleep she'd learned to survive on, but something deep and blank. When she woke, the bruise was gone. Her skin was cool, unmarked. The ache that had lived beneath her ribs had dissolved as if it had never been there.

The reckoning had not been hers.

Mark was already in the kitchen. He looked up from his coffee when she entered, his expression easy—until it wasn't. A faint crease touched his brow. He blinked, slow and uncertain.

“I... meant to ask,” he said. “Did we... have plans for tonight? Something... special?”

It wasn't a forgotten reservation. It was the day itself slipping loose in his mind, its meaning failing to take hold. The town hadn't made him angry. Or cruel. Or violent.

It had simply reassigned the debt.

The absence she had named now belonged to him. He would forget anniversaries without malice. Dates would slide away. Important moments would feel vaguely misplaced, like keys left somewhere he could no longer picture. He would carry a low, persistent bewilderment—the sense that something essential had gone missing and could not be recovered.

No shouting followed. No confrontation.

He kissed her cheek before leaving for work, the same as always. But his eyes had changed. There was distance there now. Not coldness—just space.

The account was balanced.

The truth had been paid for.

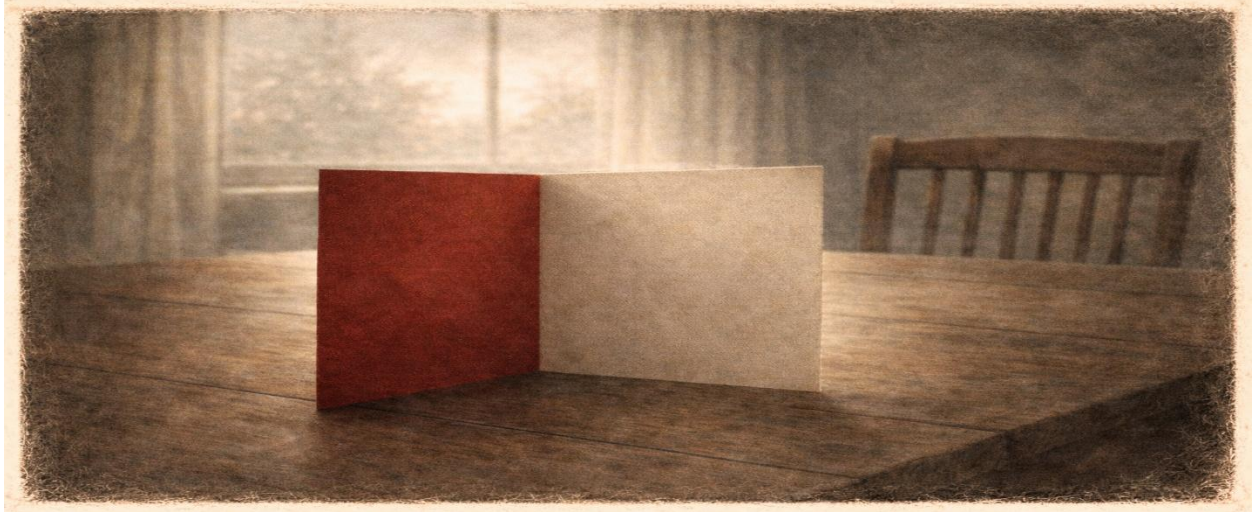
She stood alone in the quiet kitchen as morning light washed pale and clean across the counters. The house felt lighter. Empty, but honestly so. The solitude no longer pressed against her ribs.

It was not loneliness.

It was space.

And it was hers.

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## THE MORNING AFTER

(FINALITY)

The air was different.

It was clean—not just clear, but scoured, as if some slow, pervasive smoke had finally been drawn out of the rooms. The house wasn't merely quiet; it was accurate. The silence no longer leaned forward or listened back. It was absence, plain and honest. The floors felt solid beneath her feet. The walls were just walls. Whatever imbalance had lived there had been corrected, and the space left behind was undeniable.

On the kitchen table, where there had been no card before, there was one now.

A single Valentine. Red cardstock. No glitter. No verse trying too hard. She picked it up. It was warm, as if it had rested in a closed hand for a long time.

She opened it.

The inside was blank.

Not unfinished. Not waiting.

Final.

A space where something had been deliberately removed, cleaned down to nothing. It wasn't an invitation. It wasn't a promise. It was proof.

Transaction complete.

In town, things had quietly reset.

At the Piggly Wiggly, Mrs. Thibodeaux rang up her groceries—bread, eggs, a single apple. She didn't ask questions. Didn't glance at collars or chests or skies. She met her eyes once and gave a slow, measured nod.

Not approval. Not sympathy.

Acknowledgment.

A bookkeeper marking a line settled.

Outside, old Mr. Guidry stood by his mailbox, watering a stubborn patch of dirt. He glanced up as she passed, eyes pale but sharp.

“You look lighter,” he said, to the azalea bush more than to her.

He was right.

She understood it now—not with fear, but with the certainty of something carved clean into bone. Valentine's Day in Cypress Parish wasn't a punishment. It was an audit. A quiet, intimate reckoning that asked only one question and accepted only one kind of answer.

It didn't care about effort.

It didn't care about intention.

It kept count.

Valentine's was for private debts—the small, suffocating lonelinesses between two people. Christmas was something else entirely. Christmas handled the heavier accounts. Families. Blood. Generations of unspoken things.

That was colder work.

That would come later.

She set the warm, blank card back on the table. The silence in the house did not accuse her. It did not comfort her. It simply existed.

It was space.

Her space.

Some debts don't hurt when they're paid.

They hurt because they were carried for so long.

The payment is just the quiet that comes after—  
when the storm finally moves on  
and takes its weight with it.

The End...

