

How It Ends

by Kevin Michaels

When she left for the last time, everything fell apart.

It wasn't new or unexpected — it had happened before but this time it was different. All those other times there had been threats and words spoken in anger as well as too many things left unsaid. Things you had already figured out when she walked out the door. She would leave a checklist of sins and you would earn atonement by fixing what was broken and trying not to repeat the same mistakes. Or making promises you sometimes intended to keep.

You always swore that next time it would be different.

You gave up smoking and cut back on the drinking, even on Friday nights. You kept your anger in check no matter how much she pissed you off, and for a little while you even tried changing bad habits and the bits and pieces of your behavior that always led to conflict. You went to movies she liked and tuned to radio stations she wanted to hear. You pretended to be sympathetic about her job and understanding about things important to her — you made an effort to call during the day, just to say “hi” because you knew *that* was expected. You even tried honesty when truth wasn't something that ever came easily.

She told you in a thousand ways that she was tired of the lies.

You tried to change that a few different times.

There had always been a long list of “deal breakers” — things that would send her out the door to her Mom's, a cousin's house, or the couch at her friend's apartment for a few days or longer.

This time there was none of that.

Her friends told you she wanted to feel like she mattered — not just when you reached into your wallet to buy things but in the little ways lovers express feelings to each other. Paying attention when she talked and keeping track of important dates, even though there were too many to remember. Bringing flowers for no reason and cards for occasions only the two of you shared. Pretending to care.

Instead she said nothing.

It was *her* fault, you told your friends. How were you supposed to fix something without knowing what was broken.

Girls you both knew — the ones who would still talk to you, even though they all took her side — told you she was tired of the indifference. That the relationship wasn't as important to you as it was to her. What kept coming back was that she felt like she was wasting her time on something that was going nowhere. They all knew you had treated her poorly but that wasn't what drove her away — she could have made that work, they said. It kept coming back to one thing. There was no future for her. Not with someone who didn't care.

But you didn't hear that.

You didn't do anything to get her back.

All you did was get bitter and angry.

Things went downhill when she was out of your life. You blamed her when you forgot to pay the cable bill and service was cut off in the middle of Monday Night Football. You drank too much for no reason. Said it was her fault when you ignored the electric bill for three months then got into a fight with the guy who came to turn off the power. Nobody said anything but one by one your friends stopped returning calls and dropped away, and before you knew it, you were alone. You were so consumed by anger you hardly noticed.

Or cared.

You never even told your mother because you were afraid she would take her side.

You never shared a lot, but if she had been around it would have been different in a lot of ways. It was her fault you got mixed up with those guys from Jersey City early that summer. It was supposed to be easy money for a night's work, and when they told you, it sounded good - nothing too hard with a big pay day for everybody. If she had been around she would have nailed you with that stare — the one that silenced conversations — and asked if it was reasonable to trust three guys who hadn't held a steady job for five years between themselves. It wouldn't have taken more than

that. You would have known she was right and backed out. So you blamed her when the cops caught you sitting in a cargo van with the engine running while those same three guys were coming out of the warehouse in Edison with armfuls of leather coats and hand bags.

Blamed her too when she wouldn't take your call from County lockup and you had to get your cousin to post bail.

You called her again, and when it went straight through to voice mail you left her a one word message:

“Bitch.”

She probably just wanted to hear you say, “I'm sorry” at least once, and mean it.

Those words never came.

You drive down to Seaside a week before your Court hearing to clear your head. It is after Labor Day and most of the tourists have left for the season, but the water is still warm enough to swim and there are no life guards around to bother you when you go too far past the buoys. You remember the times you had been there with her, laying on the beach with the sun warming your skin, crashing waves, and looking for shells along the high water tide lines. Laughing and holding hands. You remember the good times and ignore everything else that was toxic about the relationship. And although you wonder why she would choose to leave, deep inside you know the answer. There aren't any surprises. Nothing really works like that.

Your life had been messed up before she ever came into it.

She was the tall, leggy brunette you met at the bar. She was the blonde secretary at the law firm. And the teacher from Old Bridge — the one who worked with special needs kids and always smiled until she got involved with you. She was the personal trainer you met on a blind date. She was the short redhead with the killer body who worked part-time at the GAP and went to classes at Rutgers. She was the recently divorced mom with a six year old who liked weekends in Atlantic City and long walks on cold winter afternoons. She was the girl you dated in high school.

She was Britney. And Mary. Denise. Michelle. She was Tina. And Nancy. There might have been a couple of Lisa's too. And Sandy.

She was every woman who had ever cared about you, even for a little while. Someone who gave something of herself and wanted only a little of you in return — something you found impossible to give. It wasn't a lot to ask but it was more than you could do.

The only parts of your life that had worked were the times when she had been a part of it, and you know that.

You swim out as far as you can until your arms hurt and your lungs burn, and you let the waves carry you along with the current. You think about your past and how things aren't always the way you want to remember them. No matter what kind of lies you tell yourself, there's nobody else to blame.

It was all your fault, and you know that.

But this time she's not around to see you cry.

