

## His Sunflower

“I’m telling you I’m fine!” The kitchen cabinet slammed with too much vigor and the plates shook. Megan turned to the stove eyeing her eggs while the toaster popped up her bagel.

“Megan, I heard you get up last night. You were in the bathroom for a long time.”

“Yeah, so!” She separated the two eggs that were seconds away from being done, and waited for Josh to respond.

“So?” he snapped. “You got sick, again. I’m right here and you won’t let me help. Why?” Josh walked around the island and came closer, like that would cause Megan to give him her secrets.

“Because I’m fine Josh. I promise. I’d tell you if something was really wrong,” Megan said, and gave Josh the coffee she poured him.

Setting the coffee next to the sunflowers, Josh moved into Megan’s personal space and he cupped her cheeks. One thumb rubbed across her cheekbone, and she melted in his arms. She could feel the tension of letting this go from his rigid muscles, but she knew he was going to say it any way. “There’s blood.”

Megan’s breath hitched and she hoped Josh didn’t hear the emotion catch in her throat. “What blood?”

“Don’t play with me Meg, it was on your toothbrush.”

Megan pulled away from her husband and reached for her breakfast plate. Except she wasn’t looking where she reached and the hot pan bit her skin with a numbing tingle. “Ah, damn it!”

“Babe, hold on. Come here, you need cold water.” Josh acted quickly and ushered Megan to their deep kitchen sink, turning the tap cold. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her pink fingers under water.

Josh turned to Megan, her shoulder brushing his bicep, and asked in a hushed tone, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thank you.” The corners of her mouth turned up softly.

He kissed her hair line and pulled away to grab a container for her breakfast. Megan glanced at the clock, groaning when she realized she would be twenty minutes late. Turning to the fridge, she pulled out her small lunch she probably wouldn’t have time to eat anyway. Then she pulled out the bottle of aspirin and popped two pills swallowing them dry.

Josh saw everything but chose to let it go. He kissed her quick and firm on the lips, handing over her breakfast. “Eat the breakfast when you get there, please.”

She nodded slowly, gave him a series of butterfly kisses and then rushed out the door. Before she slammed the car door and shoved her seatbelt into place, she heard Josh call, “Love you! Have a great day.”

That centered her. Josh gave her the calm she needed to slow down. Because she was already late there was no point in going eighty on the highway. Taking a deep breath and putting the car in gear, she pulled out of the driveway. And like every morning she glanced in the rearview mirror to watch Josh disappear into the house.

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Josh stood there feeling something pressing down on his shoulders. He ran his fingers through his hair looking at nothing until his eyes froze on the photos in the hallway leading to their bedroom.

He stared at happier times and walked the history of their relationship. It started with Megan’s face glowing from the orange hue of a bon fire on the beach with S’mores in her hand. The next was a selfie with Josh wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder. They had gone hiking that day and she had picked sunflowers, her favorite. The third was months later at his friend’s wedding. They were dancing and someone had caught them with their foreheads touching. Megan’s eyes smiled while his were burning with passion. In the wedding photo, Megan’s bouquet was made of sunflowers and baby’s breath. The memories after showed the great life they live.

Josh finally reached their bedroom and peed again. He found her toothbrush and glared at it. What was wrong with Meg? She’s been taking aspirin almost daily; it was never out of reach. Something’s up, and he was going to take her to the doctor if it continued to get worse.

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Megan glanced at the clock in the corner of her computer screen and realized the day had flown by.

It was lunch time, but for the past few days she made the excuse of tight deadlines and not being hungry as a way of talking herself out of putting more pressure on her sensitive stomach. On a scale of one to ten, her pain was usually a five, which she could handle, but it was getting worse by the hour. Her stomach pain became

a distraction for most of the day and it flared up in the last two hours. She needed to get this document out to her boss. But she couldn't see the screen anymore as she hunched over in her desk chair. Megan told herself to breathe through the pain. It would fade in a moment.

But it never did and she stumbled to the bathroom. Stephanie, her supervisor, was in the cubical behind Megan and stood, watching her rush to the bathroom before Megan vomitted.

Thankfully, she made it in time. Barely. She had pushed through the door and fell into the nearest bathroom stall. Her knees hit the tiled floor as a metallic taste passed over her tongue and some rolled down her lower lip, blood.

“Megan, sweetie? Are you okay?” It was Stephanie.

Megan finished and flushed, closing her eyes as she tried to steady her churning stomach. It wasn't over. Her stomach concaved and she heaved up more blood. Stomach acid burned her throat. Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes at the pain and she panted, knowing it was over for now.

“I-I'm fine, Steph. I think I just have a bug.” Megan rose on her high heels and straightened the skirt of her dress. She struggled to take the steps to the sink to clean her hands and splash water on her face. Taking a mouthful of water from the sink, she spat out the remaining taste of blood, making sure Stephanie couldn't see. Steph's brown eyes searched Megan's pale face and seemed to come to a decision.

“I'm driving you home. You're going to rest and call your husband. You don't need to be here.”

Stephanie wet a paper towel and folded it into a rectangle. “Put this around your neck. It'll help.”

Megan sputtered. “But the deadline is at five o'clock. I'm almost done.”

Stephanie shook her head and gently guided her toward the elevator. “When I get back, I'll hand it over to Alex. He can finish it for you.”

When they got in the elevator, Megan used the full support of the wall to stay on her feet.

Thirty minutes later she was settled on her couch and Stephanie covered her in a blanket. “Okay, where's your phone?”

“Purse. Left side pocket.” Her phone appeared in her hand and she promised Stephanie she would let Josh know. “Thank you, Stephanie. You didn't have to do this.”

“What are you talking about? Yes, I did. I’m your friend. Now get some rest and don’t you dare worry about the documents.” Megan wiggled uncomfortably under the heavy afghan of crocheted sunflowers and Stephanie hesitated before she left. “Do you need anything else?”

Megan shook her head. No, all she needed was her stomach to stop rebelling against her. When Stephanie left, Megan was too tired to call Josh and she fell into a fitful nap.

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Megan’s car wasn’t in the garage. Usually she gets home an hour before Josh, but maybe there was a deadline she was worried about. He’d call and see if she needed him to bring her some dinner once he got inside.

Setting his keys on the sunflower key rack, he moved further into the house, slipping off his suit jacket and rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. Then he pulled out his phone and called Megan. It rang and rang and moments later, he could hear the muffled sound of her ring tone. He moved closer to the living room and zeroed in on it. The chiming was coming from the couch, so he shoved his hand between the two couch cushions.

He ended the call as he held both phones in his hands. His jaw clenched as he rushed through the back of the house to get to their bedroom.

“Megan?” The closer he got to the room he could hear gasps and groans of pain. “Megan,” her name came out in a worried tone. “Meg, babe. Open up!” Josh had tried the door but it resisted against the turn of his wrist. In the back of his mind he understood she didn’t want him to see her in so much pain. “Megan, please let me in!” he was banging on the door his mind churning with all the ways he could force his way into the bathroom.

He heard her heave and then mumble, “I’m okay.” There were more gasps and a moan sounded like it knocked her against the wall.

Logic finally hit him and he reached up above the door to grab the key. He shoved the door open and found his wife curled against the wall with blood in the corner of her mouth. Her hands were clinched in fists of pain at her stomach. Tears escaped her closed eyes.

“Hold on, hold on. Come here.” Josh collapsed in front of Megan and pulled her into his lap. She straddled him, her arms too weak to wrap themselves around him. Her head rested on his shoulder and he placed one hand around her neck and the other over her heart. It was beating fast as she tried to catch her breath. She moaned at the feel of his warm hand around her neck and tried to get closer.

*Please, don't leave me.*

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Megan wanted to crawl right out of her own body and into his. She buried herself in Josh's lap trying to regulate her breathing. Her head went light with dizziness as she tried to push her forehead into the side of Josh's neck.

They sat there for a long time, and Josh started to caress her naked back. Josh started to rock her, and it seemed to ease the ache in her bones.

“It's okay, it's okay, it's okay.” He hummed and whispered in her ear, and soon his voice lulled her consciousness into a half sleeping state. She felt him lift her from the floor. She was floating before the bed made contact with her body. Megan then felt his warmth leave and she reached out.

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Josh lay awake that night next to his wife, guarding her the best he could. He should have taken her straight to the ER, but she stubbornly refused. She twisted in her sleep every few minutes. He had come back in with a cold, wet rag to find her fast asleep and had placed it on her forehead before stripping down to a white T-shirt and getting in bed beside her.

“Josh.” Her whisper indicated that she was awake even though her eyes were still closed.

“I'm here.” He reached out to stroke her shoulder “What hurts? What can I do?”

“My stomach.”

“I'm taking you to hospital tomorrow.” There was no room for argument in Josh's tone, and Megan didn't have it in her to back down as another wave of pain crossed her face and she moaned clutching her stomach.

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They were headed to the hospital. The highway was a long endless journey of distressed thoughts. What was wrong? How bad was it? How long has she been keeping it from him? What was going to happen? How much worse was it going to get? The realization that he may lose her was a nightmare he couldn't seem to escape.

Josh reached for Megan's hand and squeezed. She wouldn't look at him. Silent as she glared out the window. There was a chill that seemed to cling to his bones and Josh was praying their lives weren't slipping like sand through his fingers.

An hour later they were in a hospital room being questioned by a doctor. "How long has the pain been happening?"

Megan glanced at Josh. "I've always had issues with my stomach but this started three months ago."

Josh couldn't hold back his gasp and the tight grip he gave her hand at hearing that last part. "Megan?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

The doctor looked between the two of them before continuing. "Have you been throwing up?"

"Yes, blood."

The doctor nodded slowly and Josh knew he was suspecting something bad.

"Have you been drinking a lot or taking aspirin?"

"Uh, I've been trying to take some aspirin for the pain." Megan couldn't look at Josh.

"How often?"

She took too long to answer, and Josh grunted in frustration, answering for her. "Very often."

The doctor's eyebrows rose and Megan hurried to explain as he pecked at his keyboard. "They don't work for the full time, so sometimes I overlap. But I stopped because it's not working."

The doctor only nodded. "We're going to have to do an endoscopy to see inside your stomach. I recommend we do it today and see how bad it is."

"How bad?" Josh questioned.

“Mr. Thomas, your wife has been throwing up blood more than once a day. It’s bad, but hopefully you came in time to get it fixed.” The doctor stood and told them to relax. He’d grab a nurse to perform the endoscopic exam.

There was a cold silence when the doctor was gone. Josh took a moment before he spoke. He didn’t want to scare her with his own fears, and right now he felt demons setting fire to all the hope. “You should have told me sooner.” He tried not to sound accusatory but that’s exactly how it came out.

“I didn’t know how to tell you.” At least she was looking at him now, her eyes glassy.

“All you had to say was you weren’t feeling well.” Part of him blamed himself. He had seen the evidence. He should have questioned it then.

“I didn’t think it would get this serious.” She laced her fingers through his, and scooted closer, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Babe! Throwing up blood is pretty serious.” He feared what the next few days would bring.

They were silent until the nurse came in. Josh was reluctant to leave but did so once Megan was fully sedated.

*Please don’t leave me.*

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The hospital admitted Megan for observation before surgery. She still remembered when the nurse’s eye’s widened and she excused herself. The doctor came back in to look at the screen and confirmed the worst. Megan had a stomach ulcer caused by the consumption of too much aspirin.

The surgery was scheduled for tomorrow at eight in the morning. That means she would be awakened two hours before to be prepared.

Josh sat in the chair next to the bed she was laying in half asleep.

“Babe why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll be fine.” She was tired as well, but the dull pain in her stomach kept her uncomfortably awake.

But Josh was too worried. “What if the nurse comes in for something about the surgery tomorrow. Or you might get sick again. I’m not leaving you alone through that.”

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Josh stood sluggishly after sitting in one of the waiting room chairs, when he noticed the doctor striding towards him wearing a light blue papery gown covering his clothes and the surgical cap on his head.

The doctor took off his surgical cap and explained the results of the surgery. “It went well, Mr. Thomas. But she’s not out of the woods yet. There’s a good chance her stomach may get infected and if worse comes to worst the tests may show stomach cancer. We’ll make sure she’s closely watched in the next few hours and help keep any infection away.”

“Can I see her?”

The doctor nodded and started walking them back to her room, “She hasn’t woken up from the anesthesia yet, but it won’t be long.”

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Megan couldn’t keep her food down. So, they had to stay overnight again. “I’m going home to get an overnight bag. I’ll grab your book and your headphones. Did you want anything else?” Josh asked as he kissed her

Megan’s head lulled back onto the pillow and she looked up at her husband. “My own pajamas.”

“You got it, babe. I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone.” Josh ran his fingers through her hair and pushed it off her face.

Megan’s lips lifted into a tired smile, knowing he was trying to release some of the stress. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Meg.”

When Josh got home he rushed through the house. He found the duffle bag in the hallway closet after looking there three times. It was on the floor instead of on a shelf. He dropped the duffle on the bed and pulled clothes for both of them from the hangers. He found her romance book next to the bed and had to again look twice in the living room to spot her headphones.

Walking into her room at the hospital again he glanced down at his watch. Thirty-five minutes. He didn’t want her worried and began to tell her as much when he noticed she was finally asleep. For now. The



nurse would come in soon to check all her vitals. When she came back again, Josh would help Megan into her own pajamas.

Josh noticed the vase of sunflowers next to the bed and wondered who they were from before noticing the unfolded couch. He dropped the bag on the chair. He was wiped and gravitated towards the bed.

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“You should have woken me up, Meg.” Josh held the hand that didn’t have the IV taped to the back of her hand. Megan had been rubbing at it and Josh helped her by locking their fingers together.

“You were asleep.” There were circles under her eyes and she talked softly like she had a throbbing headache.

Josh took the hint and did the same. “Not very well.”

Megan sighed. “I’m sorry.” She tried to hold back the attitude but she was tired and in more pain than she was last night. “But I got zero sleep. You’re rested and I’m jealous. I can’t even think straight through the pain and exhaustion.” Her eyes drooped for five extensive seconds before she opened them to see Josh’s worried blue eyes.

“How much pain are you really in, Meg?” His chair scooted closer and because Megan was hesitating he continued, “the truth, please.”

“It’s at an eleven.” Her eyes watered as another knot tightened in her stomach. It felt like she had rocks in her gut. “They gave me pain meds through the I.V. I don’t think it’s working so well.”

“Shit,” Josh breathed. He wrapped her in another blanket to keep her warm, hoping the chill of fear would vanish from him as well.

*He was screaming for her not to leave him, but no one could hear him.*

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As expected she went into surgery. Josh was in the waiting room once again staring at the walls, stuck inside other memories. They were camping. Out in a tent wrapped in each other’s arms to stay warm.

They were driving to see his parents and she was singing every lyric to the first Greatest Hits Queen album they were playing in his truck. He had hummed the guitar solos and tapped the beat on the steering wheel.

Megan lay on the couch with a book in her hands. She lifted her legs when he came in to sit down after a long day of work. He grabbed the arch of her foot and dug in. Her attention stuttered away from the book as she focused on the feeling of his thumbs rubbing into her feet.

They shared a chocolate ice cream cone before they had dinner somewhere at the festival. She pulled him toward the carousel and they made out right in front of an eight and five-year-old. Those kisses were as sweet as the chocolate cone they finished.

A few hours later, the doctor finally came through the wooden double doors. His face was drawn. Josh didn't want to hear any of it. For just a moment, he wanted to be a deaf man.

They had taken her away from him. She had died without him by her side on a cold operating table. Josh started to pace as the doctor continued to explain what had gone wrong. "There had been too many ruptured tumors. We didn't expect any so fast."

Josh was almost ripping his hair out from the forceful way he was running his fingers through it. It was all the doctors fault. He didn't catch it in time. He couldn't hold it in any longer. "You bastard! What have you done!" Josh grabbed the lapels of the doctor's white coat and shoved him into the wall.

The doctor motioned with his hand around Josh. Whoever was behind them never rushed forward.

"Josh, I'm so sorry for your loss. Do you have anyone you should call? Her parents?" while he distracted Josh with questions the doctor gently pried his clenched fists from the jacket.

"N-no her parents died years ago."

"Siblings?" His hand rested on his shoulder in support.

"She's only got me. Just m-me." His voice was tight with unshed tears. "I want to see her." There was still disbelief in his tone.

"Okay, Mr. Thomas."

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She was still. She was cold. But her husband pulled her in as if she was alive. “Hold on, I’m here. I’m here.” His breath shuddered as he felt for a heartbeat. “Megan, can you hear me? I still need you. I’m here.” There was nothing left. And as Josh realized this he choked on his breath and buried his face in her chest.

The sorrow consumed him like a black hole consumed galaxies. The fear and emotion that he was holding in the back of his throat came rushing forward. He rocked her back and forth as he tried to grasp this new reality. Tears continued to soak her hospital gown as he sobbed.

Everything was so fast. Even though her health gradually got worse, once they were at the hospital it was a quick end. No way to say good-bye. No way to accept that she would leave him, and he couldn’t protect her from this.

“Babe, please come back, I still want you. I still love you.” His heart was ripping into tiny pieces. His heart couldn’t find the right rhythm anymore. Megan had always been his anchor. Now everything felt wild and out of control.

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A social worker and a funeral director spoke to him about what would happen next and what he needed to do. A nurse was there as well. He nodded. And maybe even grunted in acknowledgment.

But running through his head were thoughts of his wife. *You’re gone.*

*You’re gone.*

*You left me.*

*Why can I still hear you if you’re gone?*

*I still need you.*

*I still need you.*

*I still need you.*

But nobody could hear his screaming, and his breathing became none existent, his chest burned with a tight pain.

“Sir?” the nurse had said something else. But he felt like he was at the end of a tunnel hearing echoes, or had cotton balls stuck in his ears. The conversation that floated around Josh, not reaching him, stopped. The nurse pushed him into a chair.

She grabbed his shoulders. “Josh, breathe.”

It hurt. But he let air rush back in. Everything was too sharp. He had to get away.

“I-I have to go.”

He rushed through.

“Wait! What about-”

But Josh couldn’t wait, he had to get away. Now.

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Josh thought going home would bring her back. But the days that followed were quiet. Lonely. Every time he stepped outside to try and move on, the clouds mirrored his mood. The darkness that filled the sky paralleled the darkness that clung to his heart.

Everyone at work could feel the mood shift inside him and although they hesitated to give their condolences, they did. But his friends weren’t comfortable with much more. He had been asked to go home early twice. Once from the grief that started to distract others from work. And second from coming in still poisoned by the alcohol he had copiously consumed the night she was taken away from him.

Now, at the house that continued to mock him on every wall and in every cabinet and drawer, he stood in the foyer unsure what to do. Dropping the papers he brought home to work on, he stumbled into the kitchen. He had already spent an hour at a bar, but her laughter was still in his ears and her fingers were still laced within his own. Megan was gone. So why was she still here?

Josh yanked open the fridge and found the case of beer he bought weeks ago, thinking it would last him a few months. He wasn’t a drinker, but tonight he needed to drown the memories. He needed them to be fuzzy and jumbled. Grabbing four bottles, he popped open the first and chugged as much as he could. Swallowing, he gasped out a breath. And then another before he drank the rest like a man deprived of water.

Falling into the couch, he popped the lid off the next bottle. After consuming half of the fourth bottle, he felt the buzz and his vision became blurry. Slowly he looked around the room. He could still see her smiling at him from every direction.

He'd had enough. He went to the mantle of the fire place and knocked four picture frames holding her smile onto the floor. Two of them cracked. It was satisfying. He went to the cabinets that surrounded the TV and slammed the frames down on their face. Some cracked others did not. The more that fell the easier he could breathe.

Josh stumbled as fast as he could down to the basement and found an empty box. He dropped it in the hallway and tossed every picture frame into the box. He couldn't feel the tears running down his cheeks, but he could feel the heat they created. When he was done with the hall, he found the rest as quickly as he could in their room. He didn't want to stay in there long. He couldn't. He could smell her apples and brown sugar shampoo, and it caused his heart strings to knot up. Josh even shoved in the afghan, key hook, and threw out the vase of sunflowers on the island.

Once he was done, Josh collapsed against the wall. He couldn't help but stare at the empty walls. The hallway had been filled with their life, full of love. And now he had no one to share it with. No one to love, flaws and all. He had been crying silently, but at the realization that everything that represented her was gone, he curled in on himself. His knees went to his chest and the box was numbly pushed away as his chest constricted and collapsed in on itself. His cries echoed back from empty walls and a silent house.

For the third night, he slept somewhere else besides his own bed. It had been theirs. And the ghost of her still warmed the bed. Her scent emanated from her pillow and it was torture.

This time he slept with his neck bent against the wall. The night before he had slept on the couch and the night of he had found a hotel.

Clenched in his hand was a wallet sized picture. The only one he hadn't thrown out. Moments before sleep he had pulled it from his wallet. It was the morning after their friend's wedding reception. He had ordered breakfast and they had it in bed. The sheet was held up to her chest and her eyes were wide, her lips red from the strawberries. She was laughing nervously, her cheeks pink with passion. She was beautiful.

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By the start of the next week he had her in his arms once again. “Welcome home babe.” His voice was scratchy. Walking in he held her close before setting her gently on the table right inside the door. He had picked out a marbled light gray and deep blue, urn.

She would be spread in a field of sunflowers. Her favorite.