

## A BRIGHTER SUN

BY KAYE D. SCHMITZ

### MAGGIE

His fist slammed my cheek, rocking me and ridiculing my defiant stance. I teetered at the edge of the stairs, afraid to take a breath and risk tipping my delicate balance. He drew back for the second blow, and his eyes narrowed to furious green slits embedded in a face red with rage.

Blood clouded my vision, but my brain remained clear, my thoughts tumbling like lingerie in a dryer. Desperately, I snatched at them as they flew past, examining and discarding them in quick succession in an effort to focus on anything but the horror of my reality. I studied his face instead, distorted almost beyond recognition by the fury engulfing his features.

I raised my arms to defend myself, but he caught both my wrists in his beefy free hand, squeezing them together until the diamonds in my watch sliced the ulnar artery on my left hand. How appropriate. The irony swelled inside me and bubbled up, ready to spill over in hysterical laughter. “Keep your arteries strong, Maggie,” my grandmother told me when I was twelve. “Especially the one on your ring finger,” she added, touching the Friendship Ring from my sixth grade boyfriend. “The little blood vessel under this ring goes through your wrist and then straight to your heart.”

My heart—the origin of my problem, the betrayer of my trust, and, I noticed, the source of an alarmingly large pool of blood collecting on the carpet, pumping furiously from my wrist and the small artery my grandmother had advised me to protect.

My eyes found his face again, fourteen inches above, and stayed fixed, mesmerized by its

transformation. He released my wrists long enough to entwine his fingers in my hair, an easy target, swaying halfway down my back. I pictured the black hair on his thick knuckles standing out in sharp contrast to the platinum blonde threads they held.

He yanked sharply. My head snapped farther back. His eyes locked with mine and his nostrils flared with exertion. I couldn't, for the life of me, reconcile this man bearing down on me with the one who, only months earlier, had promised to love, honor, and cherish me until death parted us.

He swung hard, hastening that prospect.

My knees buckled but still he clutched my hair, holding me upright and refusing me the comfort of falling to the carpet. Blood streamed freely from my nose and enlarged the pool from my wrists.

Time slowed, pain ceased and my subconscious assumed control. I struggled to remain alert, but the blood that hadn't yet left my body buzzed in my ears, escalated to a roar, and drowned out the sound of his labored breathing. His eyes, devoid of reason, reflected only his rage, which had taken on a life of its own. Once more he drew back, his fist a venomous snake, coiled and ready to strike.

The third blow crunched between my eyes.

I staggered. He released me. And finally, I fell. Backward. Down the stairs.

I had never before had an out-of-body experience, so I didn't recognize it at first. I floated, watching the scene without being part of it, seeing my body smash its way to the landing sixteen steps below, without feeling the pain. Blissful numbness radiated throughout me. Memories from years before swirled around me and I latched onto one of my little sister. In a fit of anger, she had thrown a porcelain doll down a flight of stairs. And at the end of the journey,

the doll lay in a mangled heap, her head broken off at her neck. Like the doll, my body ricocheted off first one wall and then the other, hitting every step and turning end for end, limbs flailing uncontrollably. Unlike the doll, when I landed at the bottom, my neck wasn't broken. But almost everything else was.

Back inside my body, numbness retreated, and pain streaked in—shock waves of pain that bulleted through me and blinded me to time and place. Through swollen eyelids, the outline of my husband blurred above me before my vision cleared slightly. He appeared to be surveying his handiwork, but his chest continued to heave with rage and his massive fingers clenched and unclenched in fists by his side.

Slowly, deliberately, he pushed the thick gray hair from his forehead back into place and took a deep breath. And then a deep drink. From the nearly empty Jack Daniels bottle he had put aside prior to his first punch.

Then he smiled.

The man actually smiled. The most evil, wicked smile I've ever had the misfortune to see.

It faded from my thoughts and blackness consumed me.



The operating room light burned brilliantly intense on the figures huddled around the gurney.

“Clamp. Good. Thread this line through that tube. Okay. A little more. More. Stop. That's good. Show me the X-rays again. Damn. Where's this blood coming from?” The doctor worked silently before adding, “Has anybody talked to that animal who calls himself her husband?”

“He was with the police the last time I saw him,” the nurse responded. “I let him know we were able to set her arms and legs, but her face would take a lot longer. I think they’re all waiting to hear from you, doctor. God, did you see how big he is?” she added quietly. “And she’s, what, barely five-two and a hundred pounds soaking wet?”

“I’m not sure I can even talk to the asshole without tearing his face off,” the doctor said. “My God. I can’t get this bleeding stopped.”

“I heard the police say they haven’t charged him with anything, yet. After all, it would be her word against his. And she can’t talk.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind about what happened, but...oh shit, it’s a gusher. Sponge.”

“Sponge. Doctor, her pressure’s dropping!”

“How bad?”

“Fifty over twenty! Thirty over ten! Flatline!”

“Get me the paddles. And lower the light. I need more light! Stand clear!”



## **MAGGIE**

I’ve always loved the sun.

I spent my teen years making regular “sacrifices,” as we used to say, to the sun gods. By the end of April on any given year, my pasty white winter body sported a gloriously golden tan. Sure, sun worshipping has come back to haunt me in the form of little wrinkles around my eyes. But, oh my goodness, except for sex and chocolate cheesecake drenched in whipped cream, there is little on this earth that elicits the deep down pleasure of warm sunlight caressing an almost naked body. Especially when it’s accompanied by the exotic fragrance of coconut oil and salt air,

the roar of waves breaking just scant feet away, and the feeling of sand crunching between toes. I've always thought of a summer day at the beach as a smorgasbord for the senses.

But today's sun is really bright. And not warm. I need to move, but...I can't. My chest. Hurts. Something slamming. Slamming...my chest...



“Stand clear!” Paddles touched Maggie's chest and her body arched.

“No response, doctor.”

“Stand clear!” Again, paddles hit chest and body arched. And again. And again.

“We've got a beat, doctor. She's back.”



The policeman was tall, but Weston Stone's six-foot-five-inch height dwarfed him.

“Why do you want to know if I'm right-handed or left-handed?” the taller man snarled.

“How dare you ask me that? Do you know who I am?” His breathing quickened and he stepped a pace closer to the policeman. “I'm not answering any goddamn questions without my attorney present. Besides, she's fine. I already told you, she's been real dizzy lately. She just tripped. And happened to be at the top of the stairs.” At his sides, fingers curled rhythmically into and out of fists as he talked.

“Fine, Mr. Stone,” the officer said, “but I'll want to talk to you again when your wife wakes up. With or without your attorney.”

**MAGGIE**

Of course I saw his anger before we married. But he was clever with it. He controlled it around our friends. And my family never saw it. To them he was the poster child for charming. “You’re a lucky girl, Maggie,” my mother told me many times, “that someone of his stature finds you interesting. And older men know how to care for a woman. Hold onto him.”

But two weeks before our wedding, he lost control. Much worse than the small fits of anger I had witnessed previously.

I had always heard the term “hopping mad” but had never witnessed it. I sat on the couch watching in fascination as he stormed around the room, sweeping the entire contents of tables roughly to the floor. I’d never seen anything like it. He stomped toward me, spewing venom with each step—visibly feeding off his own anger. He stood over me menacingly, his large hands moving closer with every word, the strength of his vehemence actually lifting his heels off the floor. And moving his torso with them, up and down. Up and down.

And the trigger? A discussion about the price of champagne for our wedding reception. I had suggested we spend less money per bottle and put the savings into an extra night at our honeymoon resort in Jamaica.

“How dare you question my decision!” His standard phrase when speaking to me—the mantra from which I was expected to obediently back off, effectively bowing to his superiority.

But I hadn’t learned that by then. So I didn’t back off. What I did, instead, was commit the unforgivable sin at the ridiculous picture of him hurling so much anger for so little cause.

I laughed.

Immediately, I recognized my mistake. His chest heaved and he grew two inches taller before my eyes, swelling with the fury that choked out mere anger. The up and down motion from his rage grew more agitated and his breath came in such labored jerks, I worried he would keel over in a heart attack at my feet. What a shame he hadn't.

He lunged toward me and I rolled off the couch, grabbing my car keys from the floor. I scrambled out of his reach and headed for the door. The sound of the crash followed me, and I thought he had thrown something. But a snatched look showed him splayed on the shattered coffee table, where the momentum of his weight and forward motion had dumped him.

My mother refused to believe it. "You must have done more than that, Maggie, to make him so angry. He's an important man in this town. I'll have no talk of your canceling the wedding." At my look of disbelief, she softened slightly. "Don't worry, Honey. I'm sure it was just a lover's spat. Probably pre-wedding jitters. Every couple has issues."

He came to my house a couple hours later and greeted me as if nothing had happened. My mother fawned over him and rolled her eyes at me to come around. When she finally left the room, I faced him and said, "What the hell happened? How could that small an issue have sent you into such a rage?"

He brushed it off. "You don't need to get involved in the details I've taken care of, Maggie. You questioned my judgment, interfered with my plans. You made me mad," he said simply, shrugging his massive shoulders. "But I'm over it now. You need to get over it, too."

And for the next two weeks, he personified Prince Charming himself. He was perfect, in fact, until four days after the wedding when I "had the audacity," in his words, to suggest he had made a wrong turn on the way to our restaurant. And he had. But he never admitted it. So, we were thirty minutes late for our reservation and sat through a two hundred dollar meal beautifully

presented in a gorgeous mountain-top setting overlooking the Atlantic Ocean—in total silence. The few bits of conversation I initiated fell like rocks and, that day, formed the foundation of the protective wall I eventually built between us.

Again, my mother was no help. “There’s never been a divorce in our family, Maggie. What would people think? I can’t believe you’d even say the word out loud. Every marriage goes through rough spots. You need to try harder.”



“Try harder, Maggie. Wake up, Honey. Nurse, please. I’m her mother. There has to be something we can do to help her wake up.”

“You’re doing the best thing for her, Mrs. Johnson, by talking to her. We still don’t know a lot about brain activity during comas, but it’s widely believed that on some level comatose patients can hear those they love. And eventually, we hope, respond to them.”

Madeline Johnson’s brown eyes welled as she gazed at her once-beautiful daughter, now a lump of plaster and tubes resembling a mad scientist’s lab experiment gone awry. She searched in her purse for a tissue and her honey-colored hair fell from behind her ears to obscure her vision further.

“Will she live?”

Madeline turned toward the voice and saw a small woman in a purple suede suit, its lines obviously tailored for the body wearing it. Her perfectly coiffed white hair swept away from her face, revealing diamonds at her ears and matching stones around her neck. An aura of confidence preceded her into the room and by the time she caught up to it, she had Madeline’s complete attention. “You the mother?” the woman asked. Her manner was brusque, bordering on rudeness.

“Yes,” Madeline answered hesitantly, standing as she did so. “And you are...?”

“Belinda Remington.” The name emerged with the authority gained through years of instant recognition from those who heard it. And rightly so. The Remington family not only founded the town, but still owned most of its property.

“Oh...Mrs. Remington,” Madeline said. “I know who you are, of course. Everybody does...but what...?”

“That monster beat the stuffing out of your little girl and I’m here to see to it that he gets what’s coming to him.”

“I beg your pardon? Surely you must be mistaken.” Madeline’s breath came faster. “He loves her. He—he said she fell down the stairs. Why would you...?”

“I’ll tell you why, young woman,” Mrs. Remington barked. “I was out walking my poodle the night it happened. Fifi and I always take the street past your daughter’s house on our way home.” Mrs. Remington stopped talking and looked at Maggie. Tears welled in her cloudy gray eyes and her voice softened. “Nobody should ever put up with what he did to her—I don’t care how important he thinks he is with his car dealerships and his loan companies.” Mrs. Remington turned back to Madeline and pointed a finger in her face. “I watched him. Heard him first, actually. He screamed at her—called her names that made my blood run cold—accused her of things I know damn well she couldn’t possibly have done. So I watched him. Just to see what he’d do. And I saw everything. He punched that poor child in the face over and over again. With all his weight behind every punch. He even held her by her hair to keep her from falling so he could punch her again.”

Madeline fell into her chair, her face reflecting the horror she felt.

“I knew I couldn’t stop him,” Mrs. Remington continued. “Just like she couldn’t.” The

older woman jerked her head toward Maggie's still form. "He's a giant. But I waited until today to come forward. To give him time to do the right thing. Damn fool notion on my part—I should've known better. His kind never takes responsibility for their own actions—always somebody else's fault. He told you she started it, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"No matter now. I've already been to the police station—told them everything I told you. They're on their way to pick him up and lock him away."

Tears streamed black down Madeline's face—her carefully applied mascara no match for her anguish.

Again, Mrs. Remington pointed her finger at Madeline's nose. "But I came here to tell you that if this child lives, you need to get her the hell out of that house. He's clever and he's rich and his lawyers will have him out of jail in no time. She needs to be protected while she's here and far away when she leaves. You see to it. Or you'll have me to answer to."

Before Madeline could respond, Mrs. Remington's face crumpled in shock and pain. A throaty gurgle slid from her lips and she fell in a purple pile, her head slamming onto Madeline's lap.

Shocked, the hair on the back of Madeline's neck stood and her eyes snapped upward, finding Weston Stone's cold green ones fixed on her. Never had Madeline seen such a menacing expression on her son-in-law's face. His eyes held hers while he locked his fingers together and raised his arms over his head.

"Hold it right there."

Madeline jumped at the sound of the new voice.

Wes's face changed and his fingers unclenched, his arms still raised, but in surrender.

Madeline scooted her chair away from him, dropping Mrs. Remington unceremoniously to the floor. One policeman positioned his gun squarely in Wes's back while another locked his wrists in handcuffs.

"Boys," Wes crooned, immediately calm. "There must be some mistake here. I was only checking on my wife."

"Liar," Madeline croaked, the word barely audible. "Liar!" she repeated, her scream filling the room. Enraged, she threw herself at him, pummeling him with her fists until one of the policemen pulled her away. She sank back into her chair, sobbing from the knowledge she had worked so hard to ignore for appearance's sake. And for the part she had played in allowing her daughter's life to be threatened—and possibly ended.

Weston Stone left with the officers, headed for county jail.

Maggie's nurse revived Mrs. Remington and determined that her injuries were superficial. "But your perfect hairdo didn't survive the attack," Madeline told her with a small smile. "Come sit down and I'll help you fix it."

For the rest of the night, the two women kept a silent vigil by Maggie's bed.



## **MAGGIE**

Memories flitted in and out of my consciousness and most days passed in fuzzy little wisps—clear one second and muddled the next. I knew my mother spent time with me. And I knew I continued to have surgeries. No one gave me a mirror and I drifted through my days occasionally forced to move my arms and legs. And sometimes to talk to people and take tests. Many days I spent time in the gardens. The hospital gardens, I figured.

“How are you today, Mrs. Stone?”

The voice startled me. I thought I was alone. But it was that nice young man who sits with me sometimes. Luke...something.

“Your mother told me I would find you here. I have the papers for you to sign.”

“Papers?” I asked him. “What papers?”

“To finalize the sale of your husband’s car dealerships and loan companies. We’ve been working on it for weeks. Ever since your husband’s funeral.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “I remember.” The truth was, I didn’t remember. Not clearly anyway. I struggled to pin down his words and make them fit with facts that hovered, just out of reach. But it was no use. Too much was gone. “My husband died.” I said, nodding my head. I had no memory of it at all. But neither was I shocked. In fact, the only emotion I remembered having after hearing about his death, was a great sense of relief.

The man named Luke lay the clipboard of papers across my lap and I signed where he indicated, then smiled at him. “Thank you,” I said. The mist lifted slightly, and I saw his deep blue eyes clearly for the first time. And his dark hair, wavy across his forehead.

“With this part complete,” he told me, “the next step will be to bring you a check. If you’re up for it, maybe we can celebrate with a cup of coffee.”

“Yes,” I said, the clouds parting even further with his smile. “I would like that. But right now—”

Pain slammed the back of my head and tore the words from my throat. It blinded me to everything else. Slowly the bright warm garden dissolved into cold gray fog and I fell into a deep pit. One filled with pain. Debilitating, bone-crushing pain.



“Nurse!” Madeline Johnson screamed at the door. “Come quickly. She’s waking up and she’s thrashing around the bed.”

“Mrs. Stone,” the nurse said, taking Maggie’s vitals, “can you hear me?” The nurse parted Maggie’s eyelids and checked her pupils with a small light. Maggie turned her head and groaned.

“It hurts,” Maggie moaned.

“Of course it does, Honey,” her mother said, grabbing her other hand and kissing it. “We’ve been so worried about you.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re still in the hospital. You’ve been in a coma for weeks—three, I think. Is there a lot of pain?”

Maggie nodded and then put her hand to her head. “Ow. Oh please, give me something. It’s so bad. I can’t...”

The nurse injected a syringe into the tube in Maggie’s arm.

“Did I sign all the papers?” Maggie asked.

“Papers? Honey, you’ve been totally out of it. As I said, for three weeks. You haven’t been able to do anything.”

“No, Mother,” Maggie said. “You’re wrong. I was just with the attorney in the garden. We sold all of Wes’s dealerships and agencies after he died. All he had to do was bring me a...”

“What’s this about me dying?” Weston Stone towered over his wife.

“No,” Maggie screamed. “No! You can’t be here. You’re dead! Leave me alone.”

The nurse ushered Wes out of the room and Maggie lay back, sobbing until the sedative took effect.



## MAGGIE

I couldn't believe it. A dream. It had all been a dream. A beautiful dream that shattered with reality. Wes was still alive. I was still his wife. Nothing had changed. I would gladly have retreated back into the comfort of my coma.

Everyone else was happy I had awakened.

But for me, each new day brought with it new pain from the rehab exercises I was forced to do. Depression hovered and hampered my efforts until the day my mother came to my bed and took my hand.

"Maggie," she said, "I am so sorry I didn't listen to you about Wes. I understand now. The first night you were here, Mrs. Remington—you know who I mean, right?" At my nod, she continued. "Well, she came to see you and she told me what Wes did to you. She witnessed everything from outside your windows. She even went to the police and had him arrested, but his lawyers had him out of jail that same afternoon. Since then, he's only been able to see you with a guard. An armed guard."

I remained silent.

"You'll still be here for a while—your arms and legs have been set and are healing just fine, but the doctors still need to work on your face, so you have a number of surgeries in front of you. And when you leave here, you'll be spending time in rehab." A small sob leapt from her throat. "Please forgive me, Maggie. Please, please forgive me and let me help you. I'll do

anything..." Her words dwindled, then gave way to tears.

"Thank you, Mother." I squeezed the hand she held. "Of course I forgive you. Even I didn't know how bad he was. But here's how you can help me." I looked deep into my mother's eyes and my gaze never wavered. "You have to find me a divorce attorney. I will not live one more second with that monster. I don't care how important he is or how much money he has."

She nodded and then squeezed my hand in response. "Consider it done, Maggie. And thank you."

I met Mrs. Remington, who had become one of my mother's best friends. She told me she had an attorney lined up for me—one who had moved to town only recently. I would see him as soon as my doctors agreed to additional visitors.

Mrs. Remington became my friend as well and spent hours every day reading to me from newspapers and magazines to keep me current. Mostly she encouraged me—to take my first step when my leg casts were removed, to pick up a pen and put my feelings on paper once my arm casts came off, and to keep going with my many facial surgeries when I just didn't care anymore. She and Mother never left my side during my meetings with the divorce attorney...someone named Luke with deep blue eyes and dark hair, wavy across his forehead. He looked so familiar. But I figured I must have been wrong. There was no way I could have met him since he was new in town and I'd been in a coma. He was a nice man, a gentle man and I wished on many occasions I had met him earlier instead of Weston Stone.

Mrs. Remington owned the newspapers and all the television stations in town, so she launched a personal vendetta to ruin Wes. And it worked. Despite his size, Wes had remained a child inside who never grew out of the bullying stage. And, like all bullies, he was great at giving it out, but he couldn't take it when it was turned on him. Especially in the form of bad press. So a

week before our divorce was final, the shame and pressure got the better of him and he blew his brains out in the office of one of his car dealerships. I attended his funeral. But I never shed a tear.

I had Luke sell everything as quickly as possible and the resulting funds ensured my financial security for the rest of my life.

My mother and I remained friends with Mrs. Remington until the day she died—only a week after I was released from rehab with all my limbs functioning and my face totally repaired.

I still miss her.

Imagine my surprise when I learned I had inherited a large chunk of money from her estate, along with her vacation home on the west coast of Costa Rica. It became my full time residence, and Mrs. Remington's orphaned poodle, Fifi, accompanied me there.

We now spend our mornings walking the Costa Rican beaches, and mostly, I am content. I do miss being part of a couple, regardless of my horrible experience with it. While Fifi is a great companion, I would love to share the beautiful days and incredible sunsets with someone else who would also appreciate them as much as we do.

"Isn't that right, girl?" I asked, hugging her.

We sat on the beach, as we did on most evenings, waiting for the sunset...something I never tired of. My toes dug deep into the cool wet sand and I raised my wine glass to my lips, drained it, and then held it up in silent toast to the big orange ball, rapidly exploding into the Pacific Ocean. I had watched that bright sun extinguish itself time and time again since I'd been here. And I loved it...my new reality...vibrant days with a brighter sun, a more vivid world.

"Looks like you could use a refill."

I jumped. The voice startled me and I let out a small gasp. I thought I was alone. I hadn't,

in fact, spoken to another human being in days. Maybe longer.

My head whipped around toward the movement beside me. He plopped down and held out his full wine bottle, ready to fill my empty glass. His deep blue eyes held a question beneath his dark hair, wavy across his forehead. And his smile captured my heart.

I couldn't believe he was beside me. But my shock quickly dissolved, and I returned his smile. I bent my glass toward him, and he filled it, then one of his own.

Luke. That nice man. That gentle man.

I studied him, the man who showed up so suddenly, beside me. Yes, his appearance here on the beach was surprising. And yet not. A wave of warm comfort washed over me from the look he gave me, and the truth flashed into my brain.

I had thought I recognized him when I first met him. Because I *did* recognize him. He had been with me my whole life. In my heart. And during my coma, I dreamed him into existence—direct from my heart into my reality.

All I had to do was take his hand and welcome him to the rest of my life.

And that's exactly what I did.

