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Vision in White

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

By the time she was eight, Mackensie Elliot had been married fourteen times. She'd married each of her three best friends—as both bride and groom—her best friend's brother (under his protest), two dogs, three cats, and a rabbit.

She'd served at countless other weddings as maid of honor, bridesmaid, groomsman, best man, and officiant.

Though the dissolutions were invariably amicable, none of the marriages lasted beyond an afternoon. The transitory aspect of marriage came as no surprise to Mac, as her own parents boasted two each—so far.

Wedding Day wasn't her favorite game, but she kind of liked being the priest or the reverend or the justice of the peace. Or, after attending her father's second wife's nephew's bar mitzvah, the rabbi.

Plus, she enjoyed the cupcakes or fancy cookies and fizzy lemonade always served at the reception.

It was Parker's favorite game, and Wedding Day always took place on the Brown Estate, with its expansive gardens, pretty

groves, and silvery pond. In the cold Connecticut winters, the ceremony might take place in front of one of the roaring fires inside the big house.

They had simple weddings and elaborate affairs. Royal weddings, star-crossed elopements, circus themes, and pirate ships. All ideas were seriously considered and voted upon, and no theme or costume too outrageous.

Still, with fourteen marriages under her belt, Mac grew a bit weary of Wedding Day.

Until she experienced her seminal moment.

For her eighth birthday Mackensie's charming and mostly absent father sent her a Nikon camera. She'd never expressed any interest in photography, and initially pushed it away with the other odd gifts he'd given or sent since the divorce. But Mac's mother told *her* mother, and Grandma muttered and complained about "feckless, useless Geoffrey Elliot" and the inappropriate gift of an adult camera for a young girl who'd be better off with a Barbie doll.

As she habitually disagreed with her grandmother on principle, Mac's interest in the camera piqued. To annoy Grandma—who was visiting for the summer instead of being in her retirement community in Scottsdale, where Mac strongly believed she belonged—Mac hauled the Nikon around with her. She toyed with it, experimented. She took pictures of her room, of her feet, of her friends. Shots that were blurry and dark, or fuzzy and washed out. With her lack of success, and her mother's impending divorce from her stepfather, Mac's interest in the Nikon began to wane. Even years later she couldn't say what prompted her to bring it along to Parker's that pretty summer afternoon for Wedding Day.

Every detail of the traditional garden wedding had been planned. Emmaline as the bride and Laurel as groom would exchange their vows beneath the rose arbor. Emma would wear

the lace veil and train Parker's mother had made out of an old tablecloth, while Harold, Parker's aging and affable golden retriever walked her down the garden path to give her away.

A selection of Barbies, Kens, and Cabbage Patch Kids, along with a variety of stuffed animals lined the path as guests.

"It's a very private ceremony," Parker relayed as she fussed with Emma's veil. "With a small patio reception to follow. Now, where's the best man?"

Laurel, her knee recently skinned, shoved through a trio of hydrangeas. "He ran away, and went up a tree after a squirrel. I can't get him to come down."

Parker rolled her eyes. "I'll get him. You're not supposed to see the bride before the wedding. It's bad luck. Mac, you need to fix Emma's veil and get her bouquet. Laurel and I'll get Mr. Fish out of the tree."

"I'd rather go swimming," Mac said as she gave Emma's veil an absent tug.

"We can go after I get married."

"I guess. Aren't you tired of getting married?"

"Oh, I don't mind. And it smells so good out here. Everything's so pretty."

Mac gave Emma the clutch of dandelions and wild violets they were allowed to pick. "You look pretty."

It was invariably true. Emma's dark, shiny hair tumbled under the white lace. Her eyes sparkled a deep, deep brown as she sniffed the weed bouquet. She was tanned, sort of all golden, Mac thought, and scowled at her own milk white skin.

The curse of a redhead, her mother said, as she got her carroty hair from her father. At eight, Mac was tall for her age and skinny as a stick, with teeth already trapped in hated braces.

She thought that, beside her, Emmaline looked like a gypsy princess.

Parker and Laurel came back, giggling with the feline best

man clutched in Parker's arms. "Everybody has to take their places." Parker poured the cat into Laurel's arms. Mac, you need to get dressed! Emma—"

"I don't want to be maid of honor." Mac looked at the poofy Cinderella dress draped over a garden bench. "That thing's scratchy, and it's hot. Why can't Mr. Fish be maid of honor, and I'll be best man?"

"Because it's already planned. Everybody's nervous before a wedding." Parker flipped back her long brown pigtails, then picked up the dress to inspect it for tears or stains. Satisfied, she pushed it at Mac. "It's okay. It's going to be a beautiful ceremony, with true love and happy ever after."

"My mother says happy ever after's a bunch of bull."

There was a moment of silence after Mac's statement. The unspoken word *divorce* seemed to hang in the air.

"I don't think it has to be." Her eyes full of sympathy, Parker reached out, ran her hand along Mac's bare arm.

"I don't want to wear the dress. I don't want to be a bridesmaid. I—"

"Okay. That's okay. We can have a pretend maid of honor. Maybe you could take pictures."

Mac looked down at the camera she'd forgotten hung around her neck. "They never come out right."

"Maybe they will this time. It'll be fun. You can be the official wedding photographer."

"Take one of me and Mr. Fish," Laurel insisted, and pushed her face and the cat's together. "Take one, Mac!"

With little enthusiasm, Mac lifted the camera, pressed the shutter.

"We should've thought of this before! You can take formal portraits of the bride and groom, and more pictures during the ceremony." Busy with the new idea, Parker hung the Cinderella costume on the hydrangea bush. "It'll be good, it'll be fun. You

need to go down the path with the bride and Harold. Try to take some good ones. I'll wait, then start the music. Let's go!"

There would be cupcakes and lemonade, Mac reminded herself. And swimming later, and fun. It didn't matter if the pictures were stupid, didn't matter that her grandmother was right and she was too young for the camera.

It didn't matter that her mother was getting divorced again, or that her stepfather, who'd been okay, had already moved out.

It didn't matter that happy ever after was bull, because it was all pretend anyway.

She tried to take pictures of Emma and the obliging Harold, imagined getting the film back and seeing the blurry figures and smudges of her thumb, like always.

When the music started she felt bad that she hadn't put on the scratchy dress and given Emma a maid of honor, just because her mother and grandmother had put her in a bad mood. So she circled around to stand to the side and tried harder to take a nice picture of Harold walking Emma down the garden path.

It looked different through the lens, she thought, the way she could focus on Emma's face—the way the veil lay over her hair. And the way the sun shined through the lace was pretty.

She took more pictures as Parker began the "Dearly Beloved" as the Reverend Whistledown, as Emma and Laurel took hands and Harold curled up to sleep and snore at their feet.

She noticed how bright Laurel's hair was, how the sun caught the edges of it beneath the tall black hat she wore as groom. How Mr. Fish's whiskers twitched as he yawned.

When it happened, it happened as much inside Mac as out. Her three friends were grouped under the lush white curve of the arbor, a triangle of pretty young girls. Some instinct had Mac shifting her position, just slightly, tilting the camera just a bit. She didn't know it as composition, only that it looked nicer through the lens.

And the blue butterfly fluttered across her range of vision to land on the head of a butter yellow dandelion in Emma's bouquet. The surprise and pleasure struck the three faces in that triangle under the white roses almost as one.

Mac pressed the shutter.

She knew, *knew*, the photograph wouldn't be blurry and dark or fuzzy and washed out. Her thumb wouldn't be blocking the lens. She knew exactly what the picture would look like, knew her grandmother had been wrong after all.

Maybe happy ever after was bull, but she knew she wanted to take more pictures of moments that *were* happy. Because then they were ever after.

CHAPTER ONE

On January first, Mac rolled over to smack her alarm clock, and ended up facedown on the floor of her studio.

"Shit. Happy New Year."

She lay, groggy and baffled, until she remembered she'd never made it upstairs into bed—and the alarm was from her computer, set to wake her at noon.

She pushed herself up to stagger to the kitchen and the coffeemaker.

Why did people want to get married on New Year's Eve? Why would they make a formal ritual out of a holiday designed for marathon drinking and probably inappropriate sex? And they just had to drag family and friends into it, not to mention wedding photographers.

Of course, when the reception had finally ended at two A.M., she could've gone to bed like a sane person instead of uploading the shots, reviewing them—spending nearly three more hours on the Hines-Myers wedding photos.

But, boy, she'd gotten some good ones. A few great ones.

Or they were all crap and she'd judged them in a euphoric blur.

No, they were good shots.

She added three spoons of sugar to the black coffee and drank it while standing at the window, looking out at the snow blanketing the gardens and lawns of the Brown Estate.

They'd done a good job on the wedding, she thought. And maybe Bob Hines and Vicky Myers would take a clue from that and do a good job on the marriage.

Either way, the memories of the day wouldn't fade. The moments, big and small, were captured. She'd refine them, finesse them, print them. Bob and Vicky could revisit the day through those images next week or sixty years from next week.

That, she thought, was as potent as sweet, black coffee on a cold winter day.

Opening a cupboard, she pulled out a box of Pop-Tarts and, eating one where she stood, went over her schedule for the day.

Clay-McFearson (Rod and Alison) wedding at six. Which meant the bride and her party would arrive by three, groom and his by four. That gave her until two for the pre-event summit meeting at the main house.

Time enough to shower, dress, go over her notes, check and recheck her equipment. Her last check of the day's weather called for sunny skies, high of thirty-two. She should be able to get some nice preparation shots using natural light and maybe talk Alison—if she was game—into a bridal portrait on the balcony with the snow in the background.

Mother of the bride, Mac remembered—Dorothy (call me Dottie)—was on the pushy and demanding side, but she'd be dealt with. If Mac couldn't handle her personally, God knew Parker would. Parker could and did handle anyone and anything.

Parker's drive and determination had turned Vows into one of the top wedding and event planning companies in the state in a

five-year period. It had turned the tragedy of her parents' deaths into hope, and the gorgeous Victorian home and the stunning grounds of the Brown Estate into a thriving and unique business.

And, Mac thought as she swallowed the last of the Pop-Tart, she herself was one of the reasons.

She moved through the studio toward the stairs to her upstairs bed and bath, stopped at one of her favorite photos. The glowing, ecstatic bride with her face lifted, her arms stretched, palms up, caught in a shower of pink rose petals.

Cover of *Today's Bride*, Mac thought. Because I'm just that good.

In her thick socks, flannel pants, and sweatshirt she climbed the stairs to transform herself from tired, pj-clad, Pop-Tart addict into sophisticated wedding photojournalist.

She ignored her unmade bed—why make it when you were just going to mess it up again?—and the bedroom clutter. The hot shower worked with the sugar and caffeine to clear out any remaining cobwebs so she could put her mind seriously to today's job.

She had a bride who was interested in trying the creative, a passive-aggressive MOB who thought she knew best, a groom so dazzling in love he'd do anything to make his bride happy. And both her B and G were seriously photogenic.

The last fact made the job both pleasure and challenge. Just how could she give her clients a photo journey of their day that was spectacular, and uniquely theirs?

Bride's colors, she thought, flipping through her mental files as she washed her short, shaggy crop of red hair. Silver and gold. Elegant, glamorous.

She'd had a look at the flowers and the cake—both getting their finishing touches today—the favors and linens, attendants' wardrobes, headdresses. She had a copy of the playlist from the band with the first dance, mother-son, father-daughter dances highlighted.

So, she thought, for the next several hours, her world would revolve around Rod and Alison.

She chose her suit, her jewelry, her makeup with nearly the same care as she chose her equipment. Loaded, she went out to make the short trek from the pool house that held her studio and little apartment to the main house.

The snow sparkled, crushed diamonds over ermine, and the air was cold and clean as mountain ice. She definitely had to get some outside shots, daylight and evening. Winter wedding, white wedding, snow on the ground, ice glistening on the trees, just dripping from the denuded willows over the pond. And there the fanciful old Victorian with its myriad rooflines, the arched and porthole windows, rising and spreading, soft blue against the hard shell of sky. Its terraces and generous portico heralded the season with their festoons of lights and greenery.

She studied it as she often did as she walked the shoveled paths. She loved the lines of it, the angles of it, with its subtle touches of pale yellow, creamy white picked out in that soft, subtle blue.

It had been as much home to her as her own growing up. Often more so, she admitted, as her own had run on her mother's capricious whims. Parker's parents had been warm, welcoming, loving and—Mac thought now—steady. They'd given her a calm port in the storm of her own childhood.

She'd grieved as much as her friend at their loss nearly seven years before.

Now the Brown Estate was her home. Her business. Her life. And a good one on every level. What could be better than doing something you loved, and doing it with the best friends you'd ever had?

She went in through the mudroom to hang up her outdoor gear, then circled around to peek into Laurel's domain.

Her friend and partner stood on a step stool, meticulously adding silver calla lilies to the five tiers of a wedding cake. Each

flower bloomed at the base of a gold acanthus leaf to glimmering, elegant effect.

"That's a winner, McBane."

Laurel's hand was steady as a surgeon's as she added the next lily. Her sunny hair was twisted at the back of her head into a messy knot that somehow suited the angular triangle of her face. As she worked, her eyes, bright as bluebells, held narrowed concentration.

"I'm so glad she went for the lily centerpiece instead of the bride and groom topper. It makes this design. Wait until we get to the ballroom and add it."

Mac pulled out a camera. "It's a good shot for the website. Okay?"

"Sure. Get any sleep?"

"Didn't hit until about five, but I stayed down till noon. You?"

"Down by two thirty. Up at seven to finish the groom's cake, the desserts—and this. I'm so damn glad we have two weeks before the next wedding." She glanced over. "Don't tell Parker I said that."

"She's up, I assume."

"She's been in here twice. She's probably been everywhere twice. I think I heard Emma come in. They may be up in the office by now."

"I'm heading up. Are you coming?"

"Ten minutes. I'll be on time."

"On time is late in Parker's world." Mac grinned. "I'll try to distract her."

"Just tell her some things can't be rushed. And that the MOB's going to get so many compliments on this cake she'll stay off our backs."

"That one could work."

Mac started out, winding through to check the entrance foyer and the massive drawing room where the ceremony itself

would take place. Emmaline and her elves had already been at work, she noted, undressing from the last wedding, redressing for the new. Every bride had her own vision, and this one wanted lots of gold and silver ribbon and swag as opposed to the lavender and cream voile of New Year's Eve.

The fire was set in the drawing room and would be lit before the guests began to arrive. White-draped chairs sparkling with silver bows formed row after row. Emma had already dressed the mantel with gold candles in silver holders, and the bride's favorite white calla lilies massed in tall, thin glass vases.

Mac circled the room, considered angles, lighting, composition—and made more notes as she walked out and took the stairs to the third floor.

As she expected, she found Parker in the conference room of their office, surrounded by her laptop, BlackBerry, folders, cell phone, and headset. Her dense brown hair hung in a long tail—sleek and simple. It worked with the suit—a quiet dove gray—that would blend in and complement the bride's colors.

Parker missed no tricks.

She didn't look up but circled a finger in the air as she continued to work on the laptop. Knowing the signal, Mac crossed to the coffee counter and filled mugs for both of them. She sat, laid down her own file, opened her own notebook.

Parker sat back, smiled, and picked up her mug. "It's going to be a good one."

"No doubt."

"Roads are clear, weather's good. The bride's up, had breakfast and a massage. The groom's had a workout and a swim. Caterers are on schedule. All attendants are accounted for." She checked her watch. "Where are Emma and Laurel?"

"Laurel's putting the finishing touches on the cake, which is stupendous. I haven't seen Emma, but she's started dressing the event areas. Pretty. I want some outdoor shots. Before and after."

"Don't keep the bride outside for too long before. We don't want her red-nosed and sniffling."

"You may have to keep the MOB off my back."

"Already noted."

Emma rushed in, a Diet Coke in one hand, a file in the other. "Tink's hungover and a no-show, so I'm one short. Let's keep this brief, okay?" She dropped down at the table. Her curling black hair bounced over the shoulders of her sweatshirt. "The Bride's Suite and the Drawing Room are dressed. Foyer and stairway, nearly finished. The bouquets, corsages, and boutonnieres checked. We've started on the Grand Hall and the Ballroom. I need to get back to that."

"Flower girl?"

"White rose pomander, silver and gold ribbon. I have her halo—roses and baby's breath—ready for the hairdresser. It's adorable. Mac, I need some pictures of the arrangements if you can fit it in. If not, I'll get them."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. The MOB—"

"I'm on it," Parker said.

"I need to—" Emma broke off as Laurel walked in.

"I'm not late," Laurel announced.

"Tink's a no-show," Parker told her. "Emma's short."

"I can fill in. I'll need to set the centerpiece of the cake and arrange the desserts, but I've got time now."

"Let's go over the timetable."

"Wait." Emma lifted her can of Diet Coke. "Toast first. Happy New Year to us, to four amazing, stupendous, and very hot women. Best pals ever."

"Also smart and kick-ass." Laurel raised her bottle of water. "To pals and partners."

"To us. Friendship and brains in four parts," Mac added, "and the sheer coolness of the whole we've made with Vows."

"And to 2009." Parker lifted her coffee mug. "The amazing,

stupendous, hot, smart, kick-ass best pals are going to have their best year ever."

"Damn right." Mac clinked her mug to the rest. "To Wedding Day, then, now, and always."

"Then, now, and always," Parker repeated. "And now. Timetable?"

"I'm on the bride," Mac began, "from her arrival, switch to groom at his. Candids during dressing event, posed as applies. Formal portraits in and out. I'll get the shots of the cake, the arrangements now, do my setup. All family and wedding party shots separate prior to the ceremony. Post-ceremony I should only need forty-five minutes for the family shots, full wedding party, and the bride and groom."

"Floral dressing in bride and groom suites complete by three. Floral dressing in foyer, Parlor, staircase, Grand Hall, and Ballroom by five." Parker glanced at Emma.

"We'll be done."

"Videographer arrives at five thirty. Guest arrivals from five thirty to six. Wedding musicians—string quartet—to begin at five forty. The band will be set up in the Ballroom by six thirty. MOG, attended by son, escorted at five fifty, MOB, escorted by son-in-law, directly after. Groom and groomsmen in place at six." Parker read off the schedule. "FOB, bride, and party in place at six. Descent and procession. Ceremony duration twenty-three minutes, recession, family moments. Guests escorted to Grand Hall at six twenty-five."

"Bar opens," Laurel said, "music, passed food."

"Six twenty-five to seven ten, photographs. Announcement of family, wedding party, and the new Mr. and Mrs. seven fifteen."

"Dinner, toasts," Emma continued. "We've got it, Parks."

"I want to make sure we move to the Ballroom and have the first dance by eight fifteen," Parker continued. "The bride espe-

cially wants her grandmother there for the first dance, and after the father-daughter, mother-son dance, for her father and his mother to dance. She's ninety, and may fade early. If we can have the cake cutting at nine thirty, the grandmother should make that, too."

"She's a sweetheart," Mac put in. "I got some nice shots of her and Alison at the rehearsal. I've got it in my notes to get some of them today. Personally, I think she'll stay for the whole deal."

"I hope she does. Cake and desserts served while dancing continues. Bouquet toss at ten fifteen."

"Tossing bouquet is set," Emma added.

"Garter toss, dancing continues. Last dance at ten fifty, bubble blowing, bride and groom depart. Event end, eleven." Parker checked her watch again. "Let's get it done. Emma and Laurel need to change. Everyone remember their headsets."

Parker's phone vibrated, and she glanced at the readout. "MOB. Again. Fourth call this morning."

"Have fun with that," Mac said and escaped.

She scouted room by room, staying out of the way of Emma and her crew as they swarmed over the house with flowers, ribbons, voile. She took shots of Laurel's cake, Emma's arrangements, framed others in her head.

It was a routine she never allowed to become routine. She knew once it became rote, she'd miss shots, opportunities, bog down on fresh angles and ideas. And whenever she felt herself dulling, she thought of a blue butterfly landing on a dandelion.

The air smelled of roses and lilies and rang with voices and footfalls. Light streamed through the tall windows in lovely beams and shafts, and glittered on the gold and silver ribbons.

"Headset, Mac!" Parker rushed down the main staircase. "The bride's arriving."

As Parker hurried down to meet the bride, Mac jogged up. She swung out on the front terrace, ignoring the cold as the

white limo sailed down the drive. As it eased to a stop she shifted her angle, set, and waited.

Maid of honor, mother of the bride. "Move, move, just a little," she muttered. Alison stepped out. The bride wore jeans, Uggs, a battered suede jacket and a bright red scarf. Mac zoomed in, changed stops. "Hey! Alison!"

The bride looked up. Surprise turned to amused delight, and to Mac's pleasure, Alison threw up both arms, tossed back her head, and laughed.

And there, Mac thought as she caught the moment, was the beginning of the journey.

Within ten minutes, the Bride's Suite—once Parker's own bedroom—bustled with people and confusion. Two hairdressers plied their tools and talents, curling, straightening, styling, while others wielded paints and pots.

Utterly female, Mac thought as she moved through the room unobtrusively, the scents, the motions, the sounds. The bride remained the focus—no nerves on this one, Mac determined. Alison was confident, beaming, and currently chattering like a magpie.

The MOB, however, was a different story.

"But you have such beautiful hair! Don't you think you should leave it down? At least some of it. Maybe—"

"An updo suits the headdress better. Relax, Mom."

"It's too warm in here. I think it's too warm in here. And Mandy should take a quick nap. She's going to act up, I just know it."

"She'll be fine." Alison glanced toward the flower girl.

"I really think—"

"Ladies!" Parker wheeled in a cart of champagne, with a pretty fruit and cheese tray. "The men are on their way. Alison, your hair's gorgeous. Absolutely regal." She poured a flute, offered it to the bride.

"I really don't think she should drink before the ceremony. She barely ate today, and—"

"Oh, Mrs. McFearson, I'm so glad you're dressed and ready. You look fabulous. If I could just steal you for a few minutes? I'd love for you to take a look at the Drawing Room before the ceremony. We want to make sure it's perfect, don't we? I'll have her back in no time." Parker pushed champagne into the MOB's hand, and steered her out of the room.

Alison said, "Whew!" and laughed.

For the next hour, Mac split herself between the bride's and groom's suites. Between perfume and tulle, cuff links and cummerbunds. She eased back into the bride's domain, circled around the attendants as they dressed and helped one another dress. And found Alison alone, standing in front of her wedding dress.

It was all there, Mac thought as she quietly framed the shot. The wonder, the joy—with just that tiny tug of sorrow. She snapped the image as Alison reached out to brush her fingers over the sparkle of the bodice.

Decisive moment, Mac knew, when everything the woman felt reflected on her face.

Then it passed, and Alison glanced over.

"I didn't expect to feel this way. I'm so happy. I'm so in love with Rod, so ready to marry him. But there's this little clutch right here." She rubbed her fingers just above her heart. "It's not nerves."

"Sadness. Just a touch. One phase of your life ends today. You're allowed to be sad to say good-bye. I know what you need. Wait here."

A moment later, Mac led Alison's grandmother over. And once again stepped back.

Youth and age, she thought. Beginnings and endings, connections and constancy. And, love.

She snapped the embrace, but that wasn't it. She snapped the

glitter of tears, and still, no. Then Alison lowered her forehead to her grandmother's, and even as her lips curved, a single tear slid down her cheek while the dress glowed and glittered behind them.

Perfect. The blue butterfly.

She took candids of the ritual while the bride dressed, then the formal portraits with exquisite natural light. As she'd expected, Alison was game to brave the cold on the terrace.

And Mac ignored Parker's voice through her headset as she rushed to the Groom's Suite to repeat the process with Rod.

She passed Parker in the hallway as she strode back to the bride. "I need the groom and party downstairs, Mac. We're running two minutes behind."

"Oh my God!" Mac said in mock horror and ducked into the Bride's Suite.

"Guests are seated," Parker announced in her ear moments later. "Groom and groomsmen taking position. Emma, gather the bridal party."

"On it."

Mac slipped out to take her stand at the bottom of the stairs as Emma organized the bridesmaids.

"Party ready. Cue the music."

"Cuing music," Parker said, "start the procession."

The flower girl would clearly be fine without the nap, Mac decided as the child nearly danced her way down the staircase. She paused like a vet at Laurel's signal, then continued at a dignified pace in her fairy dress across the foyer, into the enormous parlor, and down the aisle formed by the chairs.

The attendants followed, shimmering silver, and at last, the maid of honor in gold.

Mac crouched to aim up as the bride and her father stood at the top of the stairs, holding hands. As the bride's music swelled, he lifted his daughter's hand to his lips, then to his cheek.

Even as she took the shot, Mac's eyes stung.

Where was her own father? she wondered. Jamaica? Switzerland? Cairo?

She pushed the thought and the ache that came with it aside, and did her job.

Using Emma's candlelight, she captured joy and tears. The memories. And stayed invisible and separate.