

# The Photograph

A Short Story

By

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The photograph filled a wall that was over eight feet high and ten feet wide. There was no furniture in front of the wall, and it was the first thing you saw when you came up the short flight of stairs from the entry hall and entered the living room. It was unavoidable, and everyone that visited commented on it. You had to comment. It was a woman's face.

The oversized photograph was in Jeremy's South Kensington flat. He had taken the photo using a telephoto lens; she had been unaware of his presence. He'd cropped it to a head and shoulders shot and had it blown up by his favorite print house so he could paper his wall with her.

She was beautiful. The photograph was a candid shot; she wasn't looking at the camera; her glance was just over and to the right of his camera when the shutter snapped. Her long, lightly colored hair was almost perfect; there was just one strand that was out of place. A sidelight highlighted that lock of hair as it drifted across her left cheek; it had been in motion as Jeremy's camera froze her image for posterity. It gave her a relaxed and carefree look.

She was almost laughing. Her smile was infectious, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. Her eyes betrayed a deep and caring personality, and a happiness that radiated from her soul.

She was dressed to the nines, he recalled, but only the top of her dark jacket and white V-neck blouse showed in the photograph, carefully revealing her sexy neckline.

The background in the picture was slightly blurred, but not so much that you couldn't tell she was at an outdoor party. About fifty other people were evident in the fuzzy background. The occasion had been a wedding, but she was not the bride, only a chic guest, caught in that thousandth of a second by his Canon camera lens. Her name was Alexandra Cary Reid; people called her Alex.

Jeremy was drawn to her in every way he could imagine.

Jeremy Foltz became a photographer in high school when he volunteered to work on the school newspaper and yearbook. He turned out to have a knack for taking superb and artistic shots of people. Even at that early age and then in university his classmates sought

him out for his skills in making them look good; no, not good – great, spectacular, magnificent, God like.

At an early age, he developed darkroom skills, but gave them up immediately with the advent of digital photography. He quickly learned the manipulation of digital photos and was masterful with his computer and photo processing programs. He could work lighting magic with only the ambient lights in a room, adjusting their placement, and brightness with a rare competency professionals a generation older didn't have. Give him a studio or the ability to set his own lights and strobes, and he could create wonders for the eye to enjoy. Over time, his hobby consumed him and then became his vocation.

All that was almost fifteen years earlier. Now, he was considered at the apex of his field. He had put together and published a book of his photographs, and it had achieved critical acclaim and was selling well in both the U.K. and in America. He was booked a year out, mostly for executive media shots and wedding parties. He was sought after by every bride in the country willing to pay the outrageous price he commanded for often 'making a silk purse out of a sow's ear.' This was the expression he used with his close friends to refer to taking ugly or unbecoming brides or grooms, and making them look spectacular in their engagement or wedding photographs. Of course, he did the same for guests too. The photo on the wall of his living room was an exception; it was untouched except for its size.

Jeremy had taken over a thousand photographs at the September wedding where he photographed Alex. The photos and album that he produced were a personal gift from Jeremy to the bride and groom. The bride was his second cousin, Maddy. Everyone stood in awe of his work and the package he produced; it was significantly beyond what the new couple or their families would have ever dreamed of spending for wedding photographs. He'd even used the event to experiment with some new equipment and some daring photography outside his traditional wedding fare; the results nicely complementing the usual shots he also took.

Jeremy sat every night and studied the photograph in his living room. At the end of the day, he would come up one flight from his ground floor office and studio, pour a glass of chilled Sancerre wine he'd brought back from a trip to the Loire Valley, and sit on his sofa and stare at the photograph of Alex. He could vaguely recall a brief conversation they'd had at the wedding, nothing profound, but polite self introductions and small talk about the wedding, guests and of course the English weather. He could recite every word they'd said to one another.

Often, he wondered about his sanity. Was this just a fascination with a pretty girl he photographed – a fascination that would soon fade away? Or was he obsessed with her in some sick way – in some way where a dark side hidden within him would emerge?

Today, he decided it was the former; since he took no action to do anything other than appreciate his own photograph. On other days, however, he admitted to an obsession.

Jeremy sometimes sat and talked to the photograph. He'd tell her about his work, his frustrations, the problems he faced, his worries, his joys, his bliss, and his aspirations and dreams. He created an intimacy with the photograph he'd never known with any human being.

Over time, he fell in love with Alex. Through the love he had for her, he began to change. He found he was more sensitive to his inner voice; he also grew to like himself more. He felt he was more creative, even inspirational in his work and thinking. He felt he could open up to other people sometimes, secure that 'she' would be there when he returned home.

At the end of June, Jeremy was a guest at the second marriage of his aunt Jane. He enjoyed not being the regular photographer for the event; however, he couldn't resist the urge to bring a camera to the event to capture some candid shots. Jeremy loved photographing people – all people, especially at happy events, or at joyous moments in their lives.

He liked these rites of passage, and the joyful festivals that people made of them. He knew he was shy, and that it was through events like these that he lived a vicarious life as an outgoing person.

Jeremy had taken a few shots during the service as unobtrusively as he could, leaving the 'hired gun' to scurry around, as he usually did, seeking the perfect shots and angles as the wedding ceremony in the old Norman church unfolded. After the service, the 300 guests strolled through the church gardens to an adjacent old country inn and a special large tent set up for the event. The wedding party clustered along a riverbank for the mandatory group photos, while the guests had the luxury of an open bar at the inn.

Jeremy stood watching the gathering from a shaded corner of the patio, trying, as he usually did, to assume a cloak of invisibility so his presence didn't upset the natural flow of events. He had a Pimms in his hand, a gin and lemonade drink he always liked in the summer, and his camera slung over a shoulder ready to call into action if the 'perfect shot' materialized before his critical eye. His square jaw, athletic frame, striking six-foot height, and mid-thirties age set him well apart from the other guests, many of whom were friends of his middle-aged aunt.

Jeremy didn't notice the attractive woman with the broad brimmed hat and bright summer frock until she was standing next to him with a gin and tonic in her hand. She turned to him and spoke, awakening him from his analytical study of the wedding party.

"You're not running around taking pictures the way you were at Maddy's wedding; are you off duty?"

He turned to see Alex; her broad impish smile and dimples only three feet from him. This was someone he knew so well, but didn't know at all. "Oh my God," he thought, "This is the woman papered on my living room wall!" He was simultaneously horrified and tongue-tied.

After an awkward pause, during which he continued to stare at her, she said, "That wasn't a trick question. I remember you photographed everything at my cousin's wedding; I didn't mean to upset you. Did the shot you took of me there turn out? I'd love to see it. Jeremy, isn't it?"

After a further silence as he stared at her in shock, Jeremy slowly got his brain in gear. "Oh, excuse me for my gawkish behavior. I didn't mean to stare. I didn't expect you ... or rather anyone as nice ... I mean, you ..." He took a visible deep breath and tried again, this time blurting out, "Yes, I'm Jeremy. Jane is my aunt. I'm glad you're here too Alex."

He gestured towards Jane and the group being photographed beside the river. The color rose in Jeremy's neck. He was blushing, something he seldom did. Of course, he seldom had anything other than a business conversation with the women he worked with. 'His brides,' He called them.

She laughed. "She's something like my fifth cousin, ten times removed." She extended her hand in a friendly gesture. He noted her American accent again.

Jeremy shook her hand, still staring into her deep eyes. 'I mustn't stare,' He told himself. He thought, 'My God, she's the most beautiful woman on the planet and so much better than my photograph of her. I'm in love with her and she doesn't even know it. I'm also being a dolt. Say something smart and witty.'

He turned towards the mostly middle-aged and older crowd milling around the bar and patio. "Well, I don't have a cane or a walker. I sort of feel out of place here actually. And, yes, your photograph turned out very well." He paused wondering if he should tell her he'd splashed it across one large wall in his living room. He decided a partial truth would be acceptable; "I had a print made; it's in my, err, ah, gallery."

"Well, then, take my picture again," Alex said with a flirtatious laugh. She backed up a few feet and struck a pose.

Jeremy's mind clicked into gear as he brought his camera up: composition, back lighting, aperture setting, fill-in bounce flash, aim, and fire. He clicked off a dozen shots in a minute, each better than the last as she played to the camera. She was laughing. He

figured he was capturing and preserving beauty for posterity. He finally stopped, and she came closer again.

"What do you do with them?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll sort through these and make a little album for Jane, so she has some candid shots of everyone here."

"What about you?" Alex asked. "Who'll take your picture?"

"Well, no one," Jeremy answered, but Alex was already reaching for his camera. "If you show me what to do I'll take your picture so you can be in the album too."

Jeremy gingerly lifted the strap over his head and moved to put it around Alex's neck. The camera, lens, and flash cost well over a couple of thousand dollars, and he wasn't going to take any chances, even if she were the most beautiful person there. The problem was the hat; he hesitated. How could he loop the camera over her large hat?

Alex put her arm through the hanging strap and wound her wrist through the slack to make sure she had a firm grip. As he released the camera into her hands, he gave her a few instructions: "Hold the shutter halfway down for a second before you shoot. You'll see it auto-focus through the eye piece, then push the rest of the way down." He pointed at the camera's silver button.

Alex squinted at him through the narrow opening. He posed, smiled, and the flash went off. "I've got to get more into this as a hobby," Alex said, carefully passing the camera back into his loving hands. "I love photographs. My flat is covered with them. I think everyone I've ever met is on my walls somewhere. Will you email me this photo?"

"I'd be delighted, or you can come by ..." Jeremy stopped himself in mid sentence. He didn't want her to see herself papered across his living room wall. "No. Yes. Yes, I'll email it to you. Give me your card."

Alex dug in her purse and produced her business card. The card indicated she was a consulting manager with a prestigious worldwide firm. Jeremy extracted one of his cards from his wallet and presented to her as well.

"I'm impressed," Jeremy told her. "You work for a fine company. Good reputation. Are you based here or in the States? I detect some American in your accent."

"Good guess. I was born here, but moved to the States in the 1980s when I was a tot. I grew up there, but I live here now – as of six months ago," she added.

People were starting to sit for the dinner. "Do you know your table?" Jeremy asked.

"No," Alex said. "Seating assignments are on the table over there," pointing to a table people were filing by as they entered the dining area of the outdoor tent beside the Inn. The two of them strolled to where there was a layout of the tables with little cards for each person showing which table they were assigned to. Jeremy was at Table 4, Alex at Table 8.

Jeremy reached over and took the Table 8 card with Alex's name on it and placed it next to his at Table 4, moving a random card from his table to the now empty Table 8 slot.

"There," he said, "at least we can sit next to each other for the meal. Come and join me."

Smiling at his ploy, Alex joined him as they walked to Table 4 and introduced themselves to the others there. Jeremy knew a couple of the people from other family gatherings. He introduced his cousin.

As the dinner progressed, the conversation between Jeremy and Alex was electric. If there were other people at the table, or even at the wedding, they barely noticed. Jeremy was on his best behavior. He was urbane, witty, creative, fun loving, and compassionate, as the pair shared stories and talked about themselves. He loved this woman, yet couldn't let her know.

Later, they circulated through the tent, chatting with other members of the wedding party. They danced, consumed the mandatory piece of wedding cake, toured the picturesque inn, walked through the gardens again, and fell into a comfortable companionship.

Jeremy was pleased to learn that Alex was unattached and had no interests in anyone at the time. He shared his similar position with her. They talked about their jobs, families, education, life growing up, values, and even some quirks that they'd be embarrassed about if anyone else found out about. There was an intimacy between them that was hard to ignore.

When the wedding broke up, they kissed goodbye. It was not a kiss of notice, only a quick buss on each other's cheeks and a social hug. There was a promise to meet again and a 'call me, we'll do lunch some day soon,' tossed out by both of them.

Jeremy was in heaven that he might see her again soon, but in his mind he knew that she'd have to take the first step. Handsome as he was, he was shy and not a ladies man. He had become more comfortable with her as the evening progressed, but making that leap to ask for a date was beyond him.

As he'd promised, he e-mailed Alex the pictures he had taken of her, and one photograph she'd taken of him. He received a quick e-mail in reply thanking him, again repeating her hope of seeing him soon. The new photographs he'd taken of her had found their way to visible places around his studio, places where he could look up and see her face and feel her presence and love – at least as he imagined it would be.

He dreamed about Alex now, reliving the few hours they'd spent together at his Aunt's wedding. He felt so close to her – and yet so distant. His inability to call her irked him. He went over in his mind all the things they'd talked about and savored every word. However, as the weeks went by, snippets of conversation were forgotten or became paraphrased in his mind. This saddened him, but he couldn't do anything about it.

As the end of summer neared, an invitation to another September family wedding arrived. Jeremy hoped and even prayed that Alex would be invited and would attend. In anticipation of the event, he rehearsed some of the things he would say to her, hoping he would impress her and that she would stay with him during the reception.

Jeremy stood outside the church door, occasionally taking informal photographs of arriving guests at the wedding. Since it was family, he knew many of them and uncharacteristically played the role of unofficial greeter at the church door.

And then 'she' arrived. He spied her walking up from the church parking lot, wearing a pretty baby blue suit and a large brimmed straw hat with colored feathers. She spotted him from a hundred yards away and waved enthusiastically. Jeremy's heart jumped with joy: not only was she at the wedding, she was glad to see him.

"Oh, Jeremy," She said. "I'm so glad you're here. I've been hoping for weeks you'd be at this one."

He confessed, "I felt the same way too. I've been out here waiting to see whether you'd come."

She reached and took his hand, and together they walked into the church. Ushers walked them down the aisle. Jeremy relished the physical contact with Alex, and she showed no sign of letting go of him once they sat; she even pulled his whole arm into contact with her in an even more intimate gesture.

They were bubbly together, almost like a glass of champagne. They talked about where they'd been and what they'd been doing for the intervening months since they'd seen each other last. Alex kept saying, "I'm glad you here, and that I found you." She even kissed him on the cheek again.

The pair was inseparable throughout the wedding and reception, again using the ploy to rearrange their assigned seats so they could be together. They danced, and Jeremy noted that they held each other closer than ever before. He regretted when the slow dances ended and they had to part, and unless he was wrong, Alex did too.

Jeremy took several dozen photographs of Alex during the wedding, allowing her to also photograph him with his camera. She impressed him with her knowledge of photography and her natural sense of composition. She sought his advice about a new camera and the best shops in the city in which to buy it.

Jeremy and Alex were almost the last guests to leave the reception. The room that had been so full of people now only held the two of them and the clean up crew. As they walked to the door, Jeremy mouthed the polite phrases about getting together for a drink or lunch sometime soon. Alex hesitated and then agreed as she had before. She reminded him that she wanted prints of the photographs they'd taken of each other, especially the photos of him.

They stood together in the parking lot, unable to part. He held both her hands in his, as they said their last goodbyes. This time, Alex gave him a real hug. It wasn't just a polite gesture; it revealed some deeper need for contact. She kissed him too, and not just a peck on the cheek.

Jeremy's productivity dipped for a day or so just thinking about Alex. He still couldn't bring himself to call her, although, he thought, he was getting nearer to making a call. Every feeling he'd ever felt about her, every emotion, had been not only validated by their time together, but amplified. One day, he spent most of one afternoon in his living room talking to her, even talking about his reticence to call her or take the first steps in building a deeper relationship.

Three weeks later, Jeremy sat hunched over his computer eradicating the blotchy complexion of a seventy-something board member from one of the world's leading corporations in a photograph he'd taken the week before. The ring of his doorbell broke his concentration from his evening's toil. He saved his work and went to the door.

He pulled open the door to see a well-dressed Alex standing on his doorstep with a broad smile on her face and her briefcase in hand.

"You didn't call," she said. "And, I'm not one to wait forever. Unless you have a new girlfriend or the Queen is here for a photo shoot; I thought I'd drag you away for a glass of wine down the street."

Jeremy was speechless again. He couldn't believe she was here – in person.

After almost a minute Alex stated, "Well, I guess I've left you speechless again. I'll just have to assume the Queen's not here and that you don't have a new girlfriend. Come on. Come on." She gestured towards the pub down the street from his flat.

Finally, Jeremy's mind clicked into gear. "Wait. No. Yes. What I mean is, please come in. I've got wine here: Great wine, in fact. I picked up a carload in the Loire Valley only a couple of months ago. This is the perfect occasion." He didn't even think about the photograph on the wall of his living room and all the other pictures of Alex that were scattered around his studio and flat as he made the invitation.

Alex came into the flat and Jeremy gestured her up the half flight to the living room. He followed behind her, talking about how his office and studio were downstairs and he lived upstairs.

Alex came into the living and froze in the doorway. "Oh my God!" she uttered as she saw the immense photograph of herself on the wall facing the door. "Wow!"

Now she was the one that was speechless. Slowly she turned to him. She said, slowly, "Why?" The look on her face was one of concern as well as puzzlement.

Jeremy smiled then admitted shyly, "I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen: Why not?"

Alex nodded silently. The look of concern on her face remained.

He went on low voice, seeking her forgiveness. "I need someone to talk to, to share with. You fill that roll. Well, your photograph does. It's been here since Maddy's wedding. I know I'm a bit of a recluse, but not with you here." He gestured towards the photograph again.

Alex asked almost in a whisper, "There's no one else in your life?"

"No, just you," Jeremy said as he barely gestured to the large photograph. After a long silence, he added, "When we talked so much at Jane's wedding I was even surer I'd picked the right person to grace my flat. And then three weeks ago, you ... we spent so much time together ... I really ... you are a wonder ... and I like you so much ... so very, very much." He smiled warmly at her, his look betraying much deeper emotions.

Alex turned to him and walked the two paces to be in his arms. He enfolded her automatically as she raised her head to his for their first serious kiss.

That kiss became another ... and another.

Between kisses Jeremy told her, "I'd been afraid if you ever saw the photograph and what I'd done with it that you'd think I was a pervert or deviant, and be scared at my obsession with it – with you. I forgot it was here when you arrived and caught me unawares ... otherwise we'd be at the wine bar. I mean no offense, really."

Alex laughed slightly, "Offense? I think it's wonderful to be obsessed over. No one has even been obsessed with me before, and I think I love it.

"

Jeremy hushed her words with another torrid kiss. He whispered to her, "Oh, Alex, you are divine. You're making my dreams come true."

Alex looked him deep in the eyes and then looked at her portrait on the wall again. She also noted the other pictures of her on the tables in the room. This time she corrected her earlier statement, "Jeremy, I love being obsessed over. I'm really thrilled. Now kiss me again."

They took their kisses to the sofa. The initial tender kisses of affection and caring they both gave each other gave way to more passionate kisses as the minutes ticked by. They cooed and talked softly to each other in a loving way.

Jeremy pulled Alex's hair away from the side of her head and ran his tongue around inside her ear, and then he licked, nibbled, and kissed his way up and down her neck. Alex purred like a contented cat and leaned into his kisses.

Alex then reciprocated, with growing passion and eagerness. They looked into each other's eyes, and both knew they didn't want to stop. Alex took the initiative: one of her hands worked to undo the buttons of Jeremy's white shirt; the other hand pulled his head to hers for another passionate kiss. Both could see where the evening would lead, there was no doubt now.

"The flats across the way can see in my living room now that it's dusk. My bedroom is more private," Jeremy suggested in a very hesitant voice. He expected rejection.

Alex nodded to him and whispered, "Lead the way."

After another minute of petting and intense kissing, Jeremy stood and picked up Alex from the sofa. He was surprised at how light she was. She put her arms around his neck while continuing to kiss him.

He carried her down a short hallway, up another half flight of stairs, and into a large and masculine bedroom with a king-size bed. He set Alex on the edge of the bed with a kiss and a tender stroke of her hair. He turned and adjusted the lights so the room wasn't

totally dark, then lit two candles on the long dresser. He tossed his open shirt into a corner as well as the rest of his clothing.

When he turned back to Alex, she was nude as well. She turned to him and held her arms out in a seductive welcome. She whispered, "Jeremy, please come and make love to me."

Each of them felt the ecstasy of their first joining. Jeremy showered Alex's face and neck with kisses, and nips and licks of love. Alex purred and kept saying "Thank you" when she wasn't trying to kiss him back.

Their bodies found a natural rhythm, and yet neither of the lovers wanted their symphony to end. They would test with one another how to extend the music, occasionally slowing down or pausing to pay attention to each other in some new way. Both their bodies developed a fine moist glow showing the effort they put into their coupling. Finally, they nodded to each other in silent agreement to continue past the point of no return.

"Oh, God, I love you Alex!" Jeremy blurted out as he looked at her with such caring and devotion.

In response to his pledge, she pulled him to her in a kiss of further passion and abandon. She said softly, "Oh Jeremy, never stop. Never, never stop."

In that minute their symphony came to its crescendo, the music of their bodies playing a harmony neither of them had ever experienced before.

In the silence that followed, neither of them wanted to break the spell they had created for each other. The two of them cuddled one another for many minutes in the afterglow of their loving. Kisses were gentler, and looks of love replaced the grimaces of their intense passion from moments before.

After a few minutes of their cooing, Alex said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"A long time ago you promised me a glass of wine; does that offer still stand? And, you should know that I haven't eaten anything since breakfast and I'm famished. Do you have any food?" She giggled and added, "If all I have is wine, I'll be a cheap drunk, and you'll be able to take advantage of me – again!" She slid from the bed.

Jeremy laughed, "Although that has some appeal to it, I think I'll find us some food."

As Alex moved around his bedroom and bath, he closed his eyes for a minute to savor the last two hours since she'd arrived at his flat. Could that be all the time that had passed? Things seemed so different now, so much better. The world now seemed so much brighter, more colorful and more alive.

When he opened his eyes he found Alex wearing his shirt with only the two middle buttons fastened. She grinned at him. The shirt came to mid thigh, and looked sexy but practical. She gestured at the shirt and said, "If your neighbors glance in the windows, they won't see much." She came near the bed, struck a sexy pose, and pulled one of the shirttails up slightly. Jeremy reached for her, but she jumped out of reach with a shriek of glee.

He rose, took a robe from his closet door, pulled it on over his naked body and then led her downstairs to his kitchen. He felt so carefree and happy.

He uncorked a bottle of his favorite Sancerre and poured two glasses. He offered Alex one, but only after she kissed him. They kept smiling at each other. Their conversation flowed so effortlessly, with no loss of topics. They agreed. They disagreed. Jeremy didn't care; he was in heaven just to have be with her.

Jeremy suggested an omelet, and Alex agreed. Soon, his hands were flying as he diced up some mushrooms, peppers and ham for the dish. In a few minutes, his culinary skills were proven as he delivered the light, fluffy omelet to the table. He brought out several cheeses and a baguette as well.

"You're well prepared, aren't you," Alex stated with a touch of awe in her voice about his cooking abilities.

"Even though I live alone I like to have a civilized dinner. So I stock up once a week. You caught me today after a morning shopping expedition to Sainsbury's."

They consumed the meal with an animated and steady flow of conversation. Alex helped in the clean up after the meal. Often, Jeremy would nestle behind her while she was at the sink and kiss her neck or shoulder.

When the clean up was done, she pulled Jeremy back to the living room: "Come. I want to see my picture again."

The two of them walked down the hallway towards the living room. Alex noted the many photographs hanging there. At one point she stopped and pointed to a formal picture of the Prime Minister. "You did this?" She asked.

Jeremy nodded in the affirmative. Alex paid more attention to who the subjects were in his gallery as she went along the hallway. Every now and then a familiar face of a popular politician, corporation head, or movie star caught her eye. Every photograph made the subject look regal, handsome, or beautiful; they were all what she called 'striking.'

They entered the living room. Jeremy switched on the track lighting that illuminated the wall with Alex's picture on it. The two of them sat opposite the picture on the sofa.

"That is the best picture anyone has ever taken of me," Alex offered.

She paused and then turned to him with a serious look on her face. "While we were upstairs, you told me you loved me. Did you mean it? How could you know? We've only really talked or been together on a few occasions. And by the way, my hopping into bed with you is not my normal behavior on a first date – if this is even a date." She hid her face in her hands for minute as she laughed. She lifted her head up, rolled her eyes at her own mischievous behavior, and said with a grin, "I can't believe I did this."

Jeremy leaned over and gently smoothed her back. He kissed her tenderly, and said, "Yes, I love you. You might see me as someone you've been with a dozen or so hours at few weddings, but I see you as someone I've lived with for the past year, someone I've sat here and shared my joys with, my frustrations with, and every aspect of my life with."

She looked deep into his eyes as he talked, feeling his emotions and his caring for her. "You blow me away Jeremy. I do feel as though I've known you for a long time, yet ..."

He interrupted, "I would love you even if there weren't a photograph on the wall. Further, I don't expect you to do anything right now except, I hope, to accept what I offer. You don't have to tell me anything in return that you don't really feel. You should feel comfortable to say nothing at all. Good grief, the last thing I want to do is scare you off with how I feel; if I haven't already."

He went on, "I know I'm a bit of a nut case to have this infatuation with you and your photograph. I was worried I'd find you were a bimbo, and I'd have to change my decorating, but when we spent so much time together at Jane's wedding and again last month, I learned you were even better than I'd dreamed about. I just fell more in love with you." He smiled at her with love in his eyes.

Alex shook her head as he talked. She realized that she didn't think his obsession peculiar. She laughed at the thought she'd be a 'bimbo.' Usually, she was so serious about her work.

When he paused, she said, "But you haven't learned my quirks yet, and I have a temper. I frustrate easily. I can be too intense. I have some bizarre ideas about relationships. What if you find you can't stand something about me, something I do, some nasty habit or other? What will you do?"

Jeremy leaned in and kissed her again. "Just learn to live with them for as long as you'll keep me around, I guess." He paused and added, "I have my quirks too. I'm passionate about my photography and get lost for hours in my studio – sometimes all night. I am shy and tend to hide behind my camera lens rather than reach out to people around me. My success and notoriety are both a joy to me and a cross I have to bear. So you'll have to learn to live with me too."

He smiled at her and then pulled her into him so he could encircle her with his arms. They snuggled together, just enjoying each other's company and the warmth and affection of the night. Eventually, he picked her up and carried her upstairs again. He held her so she could click off the light switch with her toes as they left the living room.

They made love again, yet this time they each felt their spirits commune with each other. There was no awkwardness, no regrets, no lost words, and no lies, just the truth and beauty of an unfolding loving relationship. They communicated through touch, kisses, looks, and whispered word, but their silences also conveyed their caring and compassion for one another.

Jeremy whispered to her again, "I love you."

Alex looked at him and tears came to her eyes. One rolled down her cheek. She whispered to him, "I'm yours. You know that don't you?"

"Yes, I think I do," he said, hoping beyond hope that she really meant what she'd just implied. They hugged.

Later, as they peaked again, Alex collapsed onto Jeremy's chest with a fit of shivers and shakes, not from cold, but in recovery from the spasms of passion she had just experienced. Breathing restarted as well, but not without a significant number of gasps for oxygen that wasn't available fast enough. He held her tightly, surrounding her with his love and warmth.

Eventually, Jeremy reached over and turned out the dim light beside the bed. He pulled the sheet up over their bodies, and Alex cuddled into his embrace, but they remained joined.

Jeremy again whispered, "I love you."

Alex telegraphed her own feelings of love by immediately pushing her body into his. She kissed him with all the tenderness she could muster. Tears of joy filled her eyes again, and again rolled down her cheeks onto his chest and then his face.

She pulled away and studied this new man in her life. Amazing though it was, she realized that he had captured her heart. Finally, she spoke the words he'd waited all his life to hear, "Jeremy, I love you."

They kissed to acknowledge the new commitment they'd made to each other. She snuggled into his arms and purred her contentment. For a long time, they each found new ways to say the words 'I love you' to each other. They created a heaven on earth for each other. Eventually, they allowed the velvet darkness of that night and the tendrils of sleep, to encircle their entwined bodies.

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