

A close-up photograph of two young women in school uniforms. The woman on the left has dark brown hair with bangs and is wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt with a red tie. She is leaning in and kissing the woman on the right on the cheek. The woman on the right has long blonde hair in a high ponytail with a red ribbon, bangs, and blue eyes. She is wearing a white shirt with a red tie. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Springtime Love**

**in  
Bookshop Café**

**by  
Alessa**

# Springtime Love in a Bookshop Café

by Alessa

*"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming."*

- Pablo Neruda

There is a cosy little bookshop downtown that has the best collection of literature in the city. That, along with its patio café conveniently situated on the quiet and leafy sidewalk, makes it my favourite.

A certain event I witnessed there has also made it quite close to my heart.

In my thirties, sharing a loving bond with my girlfriend for many years, I may not appear overtly whimsical to most. Nevertheless, despite this perception, which I imagine is widely accepted, I experienced a revival of my faith in the power of romance on an otherwise unassuming day at the otherwise innocuous bookshop café.

It was early March, and the weather had been bitterly cold for weeks. On this particular Sunday morning, however, it was above ten degrees. That spring weather, which would normally be considered mild at best, could as well have been twenty degrees for the city's winter-weary residents. Despite the unusual and welcome warmth, the patio was unexpectedly devoid of its regular visitors.

The lazy morning was spent on my own while my girlfriend, having to attend one of the rare out-of-town conferences, left me to keep the cold at bay on my own. Safe in the knowledge that the little bookshop café would offer me a warm cup of coffee and a croissant, I brought a book to read and took it out to one of the patio chairs. My chair was facing the only padded seat on the patio, usually reserved for parents reading to their children.

On that March morning, though, the shop was empty of its regular customers, and the chair had been occupied by a young girl who was taking advantage of the pleasant weather. She'd thrown herself across the chair's arms, lounging comfortably, so I assumed she'd been there before. After a brief moment of reflection, I realised she was a regular—perhaps the owner's daughter? In fact, the previous weekend, she had helped a child find her mother after the little girl became lost in the children's section of the store. I recalled the curious inquisitiveness and brightness in her green eyes and her name, Alana, by which someone had called her.

Observing her with a book in her hands, I could tell she was a fairly slender girl, and judging by her height, she was around twelve or thirteen years old. Her dark blonde hair, which was almost the same shade as my girlfriend's when I first met her, had been pulled into twin-tails. The girl's clothes were simple and modest, albeit slightly tomboyish: black jeans with patches on the knees looked like they belonged on a teenage boy, a bright blue long-sleeved shirt, and beat-up black canvas sneakers, her foot swinging in rhythm with the upbeat jazz playing on the café's speakers.

I took a moment to appreciate her literary choice—it isn't every day one sees early teens reading Pablo Neruda's poetry—before returning my attention to my own book.

About fifteen minutes later, a rather exasperating buzzing sound erupted from somewhere in my vicinity. Its cause wasn't difficult to pinpoint—the girl had jumped in the seat without warning, reached into her baggy jeans pocket, and pulled out a cell phone.

"Hello?" Alana answered quietly, which I appreciated. The café's patio might not have been crowded, but it's only common courtesy to lower one's voice in a place with a certain number of books nearby. After a few moments, she repeated her greeting disinterestedly, drawing the word out as one is prone to do upon receiving silence on the other end. "Hellooo?"

From my right came the sound of a shoe scuffing against concrete; the girl ignored it, but I sought out the source of the noise. Standing half-concealed behind a nearby column was an older girl who was looking directly at Alana with a curious expression on her face.

Her I recognised immediately; she was of Asian appearance, with chin-length black hair and light brown eyes. She was taller than Alana and older than her too, but not by much. I guessed her age to be around fifteen. This girl was always hanging around the bookshop as well, but I never caught her name.

The strangely bright-coloured brown eyes met mine when I cast her a faintly disapproving gaze. She mouthed an apology, but she didn't say it aloud because she was on the phone. Instantly, I had my suspicions. It was a simple equation: a young girl receiving a call where the caller said nothing, and an older girl, twenty feet from the other girl, not saying anything into her own cell phone.

After a few moments, in which I could tell from the exasperated tilt of her head that Alana was planning on hanging up, the older girl said, "I see you... right now." She had lowered her voice to a whisper, which I had heard before to have a slight accent.

Slightly taken aback, I glanced at Alana without lifting my head. She was unimpressed. "Yeah, I'm sure. You've attempted this before, Mei. I'm not going to make myself look like an idiot searching for my moron of a best friend when I know she's miles away at her grandma's." She had a wry drawl, accentuated by a roll of her eyes. Despite the dry sarcasm in her voice, though, her demeanour had brightened considerably.

Obviously, the two knew each other quite well.

Mei didn't reply; she flipped her phone shut and commenced walking forward. I had an idea of what she was going to do when she began to sneak around to the back of the patio. I heaved a sigh, preparing myself for obnoxious teenage antics in a few moments.

As I had guessed, the girl had managed to remain undetected by Alana, who remained unmoved by her friend suddenly hanging up on her. She had returned to her poetry while Mei silently tiptoed behind her, bending down slowly until her mouth was right next to Alana's ear. For a long moment, she stayed in that close position, as if waiting for Alana to notice her; then she sprung the trap. From ten feet away, I heard her declare, "I told you so!" which she let out without warning beside Alana's ear.

Predictably, Alana yelped, which she managed to muffle by clapping her hands over her mouth, and jumped out of her seat. When Alana turned around, Mei was still laughing, her hands pressed against her mouth, her chest heaving. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she threw her arms around Mei's neck in an ecstatic hug. She appeared stunned for a moment, then drew back with a faint blush tinting her pale cheeks and smiled shyly. Then she smacked her on the arm.

"You suck!" Her statement, which had accompanied the reproving whack, didn't seem to make Mei feel particularly guilty. She continued laughing, seemingly delighted in her little stunt.

"You really suck," Alana muttered with more emphasis, twisting her mouth. She was trying not to laugh at herself, which wouldn't have been a problem had it been me who'd been alarmed in public. I would have been mad; she just seemed slightly embarrassed and very amused at her own jitteriness.

Alana let the girl keep laughing for a few more moments before clearing her throat. "So, what are you doing here? Besides stalking me?" She asked, fiddling with the poetry book, which she had picked up from the floor. The girl seemed considerably apologetic towards the slim volume for having dropped it on the ground in the midst of her shock at being sneaked up on.

"Well, I went to your house first," Mei replied simply, leaning forward to pluck the Neruda collection out of her hand, frowning suspiciously at its cover.

Alana didn't bother to protest the theft of her entertainment; her eyebrows pulled together slightly into an endearing frown before she raised the right one into a slight arch.

"Why?"

"Because you live there," Mei muttered distractedly as she looked over a random page's poem with a level of scepticism. "What the heck is this?"

"Captain Obvious called; he wants his cape back. Of course, I live there—I should hope that you know that by now. And can't you tell? It's 100 Love Sonnets," she replied easily, undeterred by her older friend's disjointed conversational jumps.

Mei returned the book to Alana's hands, shrugging one shoulder. "Poetry... seems a little advanced for you."

"Maybe I feel that being a sappy, starry-eyed romantic wouldn't be so bad for once, eh?" Alana was grinning brightly, but the older girl seemed incredulous. Just then, Alana seemed to realise that Mei had yet to answer her question. Waving her hands exasperatedly as if shooing a bug, she exclaimed, "Hey! That's way off-point! What are you doing here? As in this town, right now?"

I got the impression Mei had been waiting for her to ask that. "I'm home early, dear," she stated slowly, as if to a small child, patting her on the head.

Alana swatted her hand away, narrowing her eyes. "No, I mean really. Why are you here?" She was getting more curious with every passing second.

The older girl seemed to enjoy the younger one's bewilderment. However, when Alana tilted her head to the side and looked up the several inches that made up their height difference and into her eyes, Mei's resolve crumbled in a manner blatantly obvious to me, an innocent bystander.

"There was an earlier flight, and I managed to get transferred. I just wanted to... get home," she answered, sighing.

"But you were visiting family! And then you were going to come home and go to... wherever you were going to go... with Harry," the girl replied insistently.

"Harry and I broke up. Well, I broke up with Harry," she amended, shrugging awkwardly. I raised my eyebrows. Alana didn't get it, but Mei was clearly trying to tell her something.

"How come?" she pressed in a small, incredulous whisper. Her voice was buoyant, but it was suppressed in its optimism.

A small smile curled on my lips when Mei took an almost imperceptibly small step closer to her. "Because," she replied quietly, sliding her hands into the oversized pockets of the large brown winter jacket she was wearing.

Either she didn't notice her step forward or she pretended not to.

"Because why?"

"Because... of... you." She drew out each word, looking down diffidently as she spoke but lifting her bright-coloured eyes up to meet Alana's green ones when she finished.

From where I was sitting, it was clear that Alana's intake of breath was shaky. However, she wasn't letting her off so easily. "Why me? I know that he doesn't like me, but that doesn't—"

"You're my best friend..." I almost groaned when she trailed off after interrupting her assertion; she kept losing her nerve.

But Alana resumed the sentence undeterred. "He's your boyfriend. You don't have to break up with him because he dislikes me."

"No," the older girl said firmly, leaning down slightly. "No, see, he knew that I wouldn't choose him over you—I mean, he got that from the beginning. I broke up with him because of you, Lana." She raised her eyebrows, as if willing her to understand her meaning would make it happen.

Alana's mouth opened slightly, but then she closed it, frowning. I took a sip of coffee to hide my smile. Eventually, she managed to whisper, "Why?" The innocent optimism was back.

"Because..." I thought Mei was chickening out once more, but then she stepped more visibly closer to Alana, taking her slender hand into hers. "Because you're the one I couldn't keep out of my head the whole two weeks I was gone. Remember the things we talked about before? We're alike, you and me. But mostly it's because... it's only you who makes me laugh. You don't get mad when I act like an idiot. You play video games with me. You love to laugh. You have these... these eyes that just see everything. You're terrible at keeping a straight face. And... and you're the only girl I want to hold by her hand."

By the time she finished, I was grinning broadly behind my book, and Alana, whose eyes were glassy and bright, looked like she had just been given a basket of puppies.

A sliver of Alana's resolve showed itself in a stubborn pressing of her lips. "But I thought-"

The older girl looked at her with what appeared to be pure devotion in her eyes before cutting her off mid-sentence with the kind of kiss that I thought only existed in films from the forties. A large gust of wind blew up with impeccable timing, and without much of a second thought apparent, she pulled Alana closer and wrapped her tenderly into her arms.

When Mei finally pulled away, her hands were on her little friend's face, her thumbs gently caressing her cheekbones as if she were the most precious treasure in the world. Alana's face lit up radiantly in a disarmingly beaming smile.

"You suck," she whispered.

"I know," Mei replied, wrapping her arms around her possessively.

She couldn't see the way Alana bit her lip in an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the insanely wide smile that danced on her face, where a single tear made its way down her cheek.

She didn't see the look of disbelieving, pure joy that played on her face when she tucked it into Mei's welcoming shoulder.

I did.

It restored my faith in even the most against-the-odds love that there is.

The End