

Romance Excerpt: © Elizabeth Fontaine

Miles watched her walk in as he carefully hand-tamped the espresso and fit it to the holding. He knew this was her first time, not just because he would have remembered her but because of that look on her face, like she wasn't sure what the hell she just walked into. When she stopped just inside the door standing right below his latest 1930's refurb, her bright flowery skirt still swaying around her, and her white top falling just a bit beyond the strap of her bra exposing lovely olive-colored skin, he forgot the motions and paused, watching her look around his space. He followed her gaze as she turned to survey everything that was so familiar to him, the clean tables, the bikes lined at an angle to showcase their features, the spotless repair area with tools hanging in orderly lines organized by category, and finally, the bright metal and warm wooden barista area. She looked at him then, and in that moment he felt exposed. He tried to smile, which failed because he was watching her so carefully that he knew he must just look predatory.

"Add a shot of vanilla, will ya?"

Miles blinked and looked away from the woman to clear his head. He looked back at the man, another customer new to his shop, who he had already labeled "Dink."

This wasn't the first time Miles had that request, but he had to consciously soften his response because he kept wishing it would finally be the last. "We don't have flavor shots here," he said, waiting.

"What? No flavor shots?"

Miles carefully schooled his face into bland as he began the familiar spiel. "At Peak Coffee, we want you to taste the coffee because of the roast. Just taste the complex flavors of the coffee itself."

"That's what they all say," said the man.

Miles remembered what he was doing before the woman walked in and went back to pulling the shot and steaming the milk. "They?" he asked in what he hoped was a pleasant voice.

"Yes, they—all you coffee snobs. Starbucks, Caribou, all of you claim the perfect roast. Well, what about most people who just want the shot of caffeine?"

Miles winced at being lumped with the big chains. He considered reminding Dink of his request for a flavor shot, explaining to the man that was indication of his addiction to sugar as well as caffeine. He wanted to tell him there were pills for these sorts of addictions. But he said none of that. Instead, he tried to school his face into bland and finish Dink's latte, get him out the door.

"Do you at least have sugar?" the man asked.

Miles couldn't help but look up in annoyance, and he noticed then that the woman was standing right behind Dink and smiling. She raised her eyebrows, he thought, in recognition of Dink's dinkiness, so Miles smiled back at her. Dink didn't like to be ignored or mocked and turned to glare at the woman, who smiled brightly back at him.

For a moment, Miles felt some discomfort from having Dink look at her, so Miles answered his question.

“We do, but give it a try before adding it.” He knew he should let it go, let the guy walk out the door with a sugared up latte, but he had his pride and the future of his business to consider. “Adding sugar to coffee is a bit like adding 7up to good wine.” He poured the steaming milk over the espresso and watched with satisfaction as the foamy cream pushed through, creating a white lotus flower within the rich brown espresso.

The action was lost on Dink, who merely grunted, tore open four, yes four, packets of sugar and dumped them dramatically over the lotus flower. Then he shoved a lid over the cup, covered the hole with one stubby finger, and gave it a good shake, narrowing his eyes at Miles, daring him. Miles could only watch him stomp out the door. Customers never ceased to amaze him.

It wasn't until the door swung shut behind Dink that the woman began to giggle. It was a lower voice than he imagined on her, and it was sexy, not nervous or awkward. He turned to her and was again struck by her bright beauty. Her brown hair was thick and wavy and darkened on the tips from being still damp. She was practically glowing, her eyes were laughing, and her full lips curved up in a genuine smile. He was content just watching her laugh, and he even found himself smiling with her.

Then he could feel Jeremy, who was behind the pane of glass that separated the bike repair area from the barista area, looking at him. He looked over and confirmed that his friend and repair shop manager was indeed gaping at the interaction. Of course Dink didn't catch Jeremy's attention; it was when he was actually smiling at a lady that Jeremy tuned in. Not too surprising given his friends had long since written him off as asexual. Miles looked back to the woman, waiting to order but still smiling, and knew with certainty that had there ever been any self-doubt, there was nothing asexual about Miles Griffin now.

Before Miles could say something appropriate, like “what can I get you today,” she said, “Have you ever tried 7up in wine?”

The question wasn't what he expected, and she was blushing a little now, so he wasn't sure what to say.

“Well, it's not all that bad.” She went on, “We used to use it as a chaser to shots of vodka.” Then she reddened even more. “I mean, I did in high school, you know, years ago...”

Miles could tell she was uncomfortable, but he was having a hard time following her line of conversation.

“I'm sure you never did anything like that...anyway, I'd like a single shot mocha with lots of whipped cream.”

Miles could hear Jeremy laughing even though he was trying to cover it with a cough.

The woman was suddenly quiet and looked self-consciously over at Jeremy, who was wiping away tears and turning away. Miles silently vowed to mess with Jeremy's tools—maybe switch up the order of the allen wrenches—before the end of the day, but first he needed to fix this awkward moment.

“I haven't actually tried it, 7up and wine, but it's one of those things I imagine you just shouldn't do.”

She looked at Miles and smiled again. “Like sugar and coffee?”

“Yes, like that,” Miles smiled back. And then his smile faded, “but I have to say, we only have double shots and we don’t have whipped cream.”

“What?” she said, he hoped, mimicking the man, but Miles couldn’t be sure. It was times like these that Miles wished he wasn’t such a coffee snob, that he could just buy the over-roasted, cheap, coffee beans, drown them in flavor shots or blend them up with syrup and call it some kind of cute name. She continued, “And what kind of sin am I revealing in that request?”

Again, Miles was struck by what seemed to be a non-sequitor, and he could only stare into her eyes, which were hazel with little specks of yellow and brown. He wondered what he did to the universe to deserve such an odd morning.

But she wasn’t at any loss for words. “Don’t tell me whipped cream is like 7up!”

“No,” he said, hoping he didn’t offend her. “It’s more like adding orange juice to champagne.”

“Is it your regular practice to offend your customers?” she asked, her eyes still smiling.

Miles felt the truth in her last statement. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He looked down, and god, blushed!

He knew then that any chance of scoring a date or a conversation with this woman was over. But then, had he really just considered asking her on a date? What was wrong with him this morning?

“No, no, I’m just kidding. Like you,” she said quickly. He watched as she paused, processing, he thought, yeah, processed what a moron he was. “Wait, you’re not joking, are you?”

Just when he thought it couldn’t get any worse, she called him out. But he couldn’t lie to her. “No, I don’t joke about coffee.” And why the hell not? It was yet another moment of realizing he needed to lighten up. Jeremy told him this constantly, but he rarely recognized the lightness in life, he just didn’t see it.

“Okay,” she said, raising her arms out to her side, palms up. “Do your worst!” Her breasts bounced a little and seemed ready to burst the seams of her white shirt. He imagined doing his worst to those breasts—licking them, biting them. He imagined in that fleeting moment doing his worst to every inch of her body. He imagined, and the imagining was almost painful, and yet, he knew that couldn’t be what she meant—he had to be missing the true intention of her words because what woman walked up to a man, offered herself and told him to do his worst? He frowned, wondering what the hell she must mean.

“I mean your best.” She said then, pulling her arms in. “Make me a mocha like you’ve never done it before!” This proclamation ended with her right arm pumped into the air. He couldn’t stop watching her, her breasts jiggling, her arm taut above her head, her smile now not so bright as it was before. Part of his brain registered that customers were beginning to form a line, that he should just make her damn mocha, but she was this little thing with all the right curves, and she stood in front of him doing some kind of cheer—a mocha cheer. He felt a little less embarrassed about himself in that moment, which finally allowed him to snap out of his stupor, to smile, and to consider making her a mocha like

he'd never done before. He resisted the urge to throw a fist in the air, and turned toward his haven, the espresso machine.

Feeling her watching as he made her mocha, Miles felt a little electrified, like he was perceiving more, enjoying more, like he used to feel when he first learned that like building a good bike, a good coffee came from good parts and good process. He decided to shape the foam into a four tiered pine tree, one of his specialties, hoping she would notice the extra effort. He considered making a heart, but thought it would be too soon for that. Some baristas made hearts for every lady—young, old, cute, ugly, hoping for a good tip, but he didn't want to give her the wrong impression—that he was desperate. She clearly already noticed him noticing her, and he didn't want to scare off the first girl who made his stomach summersault in...years? He wanted her to come back, be a regular. He imagined her coming in every morning—seeing her every day, serving her mochas, talking for hours over the counter, perhaps inviting her out to eat in a couple weeks, taking her to Pizza Luce's and sitting in a booth, kissing her goodnight that first night, biting down on her delicious nipples through her drenched white shirt. When he began to harden, he quickly stopped the train of thoughts and bent down to get a plate to put the cup on. He didn't need to bend down to get it, but he did need a moment to compose himself before he took her money.

Miles saw her put two dollars in the tip jar, and while he appreciated it, it made him uncomfortable. During his brief time as a barista in France, where he wore a suit and tie as he poured espresso and steamed milk, he came to expect respect. The French understood the importance of fine coffee. Americans, however, seemed to only want a hit of sugar and caffeine, the cheaper the better, and that is exactly what brought him back from his stint in France—to bring a little coffee culture to Minneapolis. He could tell by the way she smiled at him that she was friendly, but he also wondered if she was one of those people who felt sorry for people in service jobs, people who make less than they do. Slightly irritated, yet still caught up in how he felt around her, he said, "Well, enjoy. I think you will find it rich even without the whipped cream."

She looked down into the drink. "Wow," she whispered, "this is lovely. I think I might need to take a picture."

"Yeah, I do that sometimes," Miles admitted. And then, unfortunately, he went on. "In fact, the only pictures on my phone are pictures of my white foaming shapes."

For not the first time, he felt the urge to rewind and redo that scene.

"I was just kidding you know," she said. But of course she was. "...about the picture, but now you've got me curious. Show me your best white foaming shape."

Miles looked back at the line, and was relieved when Jeremy, eyebrows raised, sauntered into the coffee area and began taking orders. Miles knew he was caught, that once she left, Jeremy would grill him. He was also slightly embarrassed by his admission and humored by her slight interest, but he just couldn't step away because the right side of her mouth pulled up a little higher than the left, making it more of a smirk. He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and his wallpaper immediately displayed his pride and joy—an abstract work of art created in a latte a couple weeks ago for a completely unappreciative customer. He had snapped the photo quickly before calling up her drink as ready, going unnoticed. And while it was even more embarrassing that he had all but admitted that he was a complete nerd to this

woman, he was also a little proud as she pulled the phone out of his hand and held it tilted just right to really see the masterpiece.

She looked intently and finally spoke. "I don't know what to say other than you are a complete coffee geek, and that is one good looking latte."

Miles smiled. He knew she meant it. In that moment, he wanted to ask her out, but he knew nothing about her, and this was his business. He couldn't run a business if he started to hit on his customers. Never mind this was the first time he had felt inclined to do so. He needed to let her go. But she'd be back. That mocha would be the best mocha she had ever tasted, and he knew she wouldn't stay away long. Smug with this realization, he smiled at her. "I'll take that as a compliment. Enjoy that work of art, okay?"

"I will," she said, looking at him for a moment. She handed him his phone back, picked up her mocha, and walked out the door.

He watched her hips sway inside the loose, sheer confines of her flowing, translucent skirt and couldn't get the image out of his head for the rest of the day.