

Out of Her Comfort Zone by Judy Yi

Short introduction: Growing weary of his fast paced life as a celebrity food critic, Landon Grant sets out on an impulsive road trip only to have his car break down. Resigning himself to spending four days in Weldon, he takes a stroll through the quaint town and discovers a small bakery called Comfort Zone. Tempted by the delectable scents drifting into the streets, Landon walks in...

He stood rooted to the spot with his heart hammering against his rib cage, because he couldn't look away from the lovely woman behind it. She was efficiently replenishing the display case while chatting with a customer at the counter. Her silvery blond hair was cropped short into a flirty pixie cut, emphasizing her wide eyes and generous lips. She was dressed in a casual white blouse with the sleeves rolled halfway up, and he caught glimpses of her long, jean-clad legs between the display of desserts.

The customer must have said something funny, because she suddenly burst out with a delighted open-mouthed laugh. Her cheeks turned a lovely pink, and her eyes crinkled in undisguised merriment. Landon jerked out of his paralysis and started taking determined steps toward her. But he abruptly halted mid-way, because he realized that he was about to walk up to the counter to kiss her breathless. Above the roar of his pounding heart, the sane part of his brain managed to speak up. *Stop acting like a lecherous lunatic! You'll get thrown out on your ass!*

A couple of people were starting to look up at him with curious glances. *Get a grip, Grant.* He'd seen beautiful women before. He had even dated a fair number of them. There was no reason for him to act like a hormone-crazed teenager. His survival instinct pushed him to go up to the counter and order something before he made an utter fool of himself.

As he reached the counter, she turned her attention away from her conversation and looked up at him. The easy smile on her face seemed to falter for a second, but he was sure he had imagined it. She couldn't possibly be experiencing even a fraction of what he was feeling.

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Aubrey had noticed him the moment he stepped into the bakery. At six-feet-three with broad shoulders and narrow hips, he was hard to miss. Her heart skipped nervously in an unfamiliar dance bringing heat to her cheeks. She took surreptitious glances at him from under her lashes pretending to rearrange the already immaculate display case. His dark hair was a little unruly, like he had just gotten out of bed. *Sexy*. The thought came unbidden to her mind like a soft sigh, and her pulse jumped faster.

He obviously wasn't from around here. Although his black crew neck shirt and well-worn jeans looked casual, she could tell that they were far from cheap. He wore the clothes easily - not to mention filled them out gorgeously - and moved with such unaffected confidence that Aubrey intuitively knew that he was a man who was used to getting what he wanted. She also knew what word summed him up perfectly for her. *Trouble*.

When he finally walked up to the counter, Aubrey looked up at him with a determined smile plastered on her face, but she felt it slip when she saw his piercing green eyes staring back at her. She quickly curved her lips again and asked, "What can I get for you, hon?"

"What..." he began but paused to clear his throat. Then he tried again with a sheepish grin, "What do you recommend? It's my first time here."

Aubrey had trouble breathing when he smiled at her. *Are you kidding me? Is that a dimple? How is a girl supposed to think straight being smiled at like that?* But with valiant effort, Aubrey maintained her professional smile and managed to point to the display case, "My

favorite is the pretzel bread pudding. It's served warm with a scoop of vanilla bean ice cream on top. It goes wonderfully with our dark Sumatra coffee."

"Sounds like something I shouldn't pass up," he replied softly with his eyes on her face. Something about the way he said it made Aubrey's cheeks flush with more color.

Editor's Critique:

Judy, I really like this selection. It's very well-written, and includes pastries, which is always a plus! Also, the big-city hero is visibly out of his element in a small-town setting, and that's a contrast that works nicely for many of our category romance lines. It naturally creates conflict and tension.

What the excerpt didn't provide for me, however, was the reasoning behind the hero or heroine's senses of urgency. This excerpt didn't give us a sense of his romantic past, which is fine, but his reaction – to want to kiss her breathless - seemed too exaggerated for someone who just walked into a bakery and saw a beautiful woman behind the counter. There should be a reason behind the severity of this reaction. I definitely wanted to know what made this hunky guy tick!

The same goes for Aubrey. I think the hero and heroine should interact, flirt a bit, create the foundation of a relationship before they feel such intense chemistry.

Thanks again and best of luck with this story!