

## A Cup of Joe

by Kelly Esparza

“Oh, gosh, Layla, I don’t think I can do this. I-I should cancel,” I said, my breath catching. I was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

“Calm down,” Layla replied on the other end. I could imagine her rolling her eyes and standing with a hand on her hip saying this. My cell phone felt cool against my cheek as I paced back and forth in my living room. “You can’t cancel *now*. That would be rude. You *can* do this. I know you’ve been out of the dating scene for a while and that first dates are notoriously awkward, but you can do it. And if it’s disastrous,” she said, chuckling, “then you have a funny story to tell people.”

It had been three—no, four—years since my last relationship, also known as the one that broke me entirely. And it was none other than Myles Moore. I’d met him my sophomore year of college in a class, and we dated for a few months before he called it quits over *text*. I’d later find out he’d been cheating on me with another girl, and that was only the half of it. My mind flashed to the times Myles argued just to argue with me, how his jaw clenched when he didn’t get what he wanted from me, how he acted like I was always at fault. Layla was the one who helped me when I crumbled, and for the next four years, I threw myself into my studies and focused on being with my friends. Time had a way of healing my scarred heart. It was only then, when I felt like my old self again, that *he* asked me out. Joe Finley from the coffee shop across the street. Even though I was very much over Myles, I worried about dating again, about letting someone in once more. What if I was only setting myself up for heartbreak?

I pushed these worries aside and instead nodded, keeping the phone pressed to my ear. “You’re right,” I replied. And then, as if I was talking to myself more than to Layla, I repeated, “I can do this.” The doorbell rang then, making me jump. “He’s *here*,” I anxiously whispered into the phone. “Gotta go. I’ll tell you everything after.”

“You better,” she said and hung up. I slipped my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and grabbed my brown leather purse, slinging it over my left shoulder. Taking a deep breath, I walked over to the door, my heart speeding up, as I unlocked and opened it. A soft breeze brushed past my shoulders, and I wondered if my light-weight lavender sweater would be enough to keep me warm.

Joe stood dressed in a long sleeve baby blue polo shirt and jeans with his arms behind his back. His tousled black hair was combed to one side, and he looked at me with those light blue eyes. “Hey, Sadie,” he greeted and then took both of his arms out from behind his back, revealing a to-go coffee cup in each of his hands. He outstretched his right one. “I got you your favorite. A peppermint latte. Don’t worry, it’s decaf.”

“Hi,” I said and smiled, “that’s so sweet of you. Thank you.” Grabbing the cup and taking a sip, the warm minty goodness slid down my throat.

Joe worked at Laken’s, a local coffee shop near my apartment. As a regular customer, he always took my order and probably had it memorized by now. Those fleeting moments when his fingers would accidentally brush against mine as he handed me my drink were enough to make my heart skip a beat. For months, we’d exchanged polite small talk, and our daily encounters soon became a highlight of my day. I thought my growing crush on him was unrequited, but just last week, when I had ordered my usual, he looked me straight in the eyes and asked me out. And of course, I said yes.

“I thought we could maybe take a walk,” he suggested in a casual tone. He moved a little so that I could join him outside.

“I-I would like that,” I said, taking a step and locking the door behind me. As we strolled past a single file line of bare trees on both sides of the street, a short silence swept over us. My legs and arms felt mechanical and awkward, and my heart sounded louder than my breathing.

“Can I hold your hand?” Joe asked quietly without looking at me, his voice sweet. I glanced at him and nodded. He slipped his hand—the one not holding his coffee cup—into mine. It was warm. I hoped and silently prayed that my hand wasn’t clammy with sweat. That would be absolutely embarrassing.

Joe’s eyes flickered to me. “Y-you look pretty today,” he stated, his cheeks flushing a rosy pink color. “I-I mean, you always look pretty b-but especially so,” he quickly added.

I bit my lip and glanced down. “Thank you,” I replied. I had never seen him look flustered; he always seemed casual and cool at Laken’s. It was comforting to see that I wasn’t the only one anxious about our first date.

He asked me what I do for a living, and I said I was fresh out of grad school, getting a job as a librarian. He said he was working part-time at Laken’s while he was earning his master’s in social work. We talked about our love of coffee and books and our favorite hobbies and places to travel. After a while, I realized this was the best I had felt in a long time, and talking to him felt natural, as if maybe I’d known him for much longer than I had. We made each other cackle with laughter, our clasped hands swinging back and forth as we walked, the both of us starting to relax.

As the sun settled behind the buildings saying good night to the day, outlining the local shops in pinks and oranges, the air grew crisp, but I hardly noticed because talking to Joe made me feel warm inside. When we made it full circle, stopping right outside of my apartment, Joe acknowledged, “This was fun. Maybe we could do this again sometime.” He threw his empty coffee cup into the trash can nearby.

I nodded, biting my lip again and giving him a shy smile. “I would love that,” I replied. Taking the last few sips of what little remained in my coffee cup, I then tossed it into the trash.

Joe cracked a smile. “You have a coffee mustache,” he said. How embarrassing. My fingertips flew up to my upper lip, only to find there wasn’t anything there. I dropped my hand, my

face scrunching up in confusion, but before I could say anything, Joe leaned in and planted a soft kiss on my lips. My eyebrows shot up in surprise, but I closed my eyes, kissing him. When he broke away, I opened my eyes as he added with a grin, “Wanted it to be a surprise kiss. Hope that was okay.”

My cheeks grew warm, a big goofy smile appearing on my face, as I wrapped a piece of my chestnut brown hair behind my ear. “More than okay with me,” I replied, leaning forward and kissing him again.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Joe said decisively. When I glanced his way again, his cheeks were redder than before, and a toothy smile reached his eyes.

I nodded, pecked his cheek, and said good night, heading into my apartment. I shut the door behind me, my back pressing against the door, that big goofy smile never leaving my face. I couldn’t wait to tell Layla everything about Joe. I didn’t know if Joe and I would work out, but I wanted to believe that we could. Although I was anxious for what the future had in store for me, spending time with Joe made me *want* to let him into my world, and right now, I could feel all my anxieties drain away. And instead, my heart melted, for I could already see that I was in for something special.

