

Self

The problem, as it happened, was that Michael really was an attractive sort of fellow. So, when Julie suggested Kevin catch her set during Open Mike Night at the Student Center, he was more than happy for the distraction.

The problem of Michael's charm had plagued Kevin since the start of term, nearly nine weeks before. For some reason Kevin just couldn't get thoughts of Michael's ponytail out of his mind. Kevin would close his eyes, images of the way Michael's pants flexed as he walked away would come unbidden. And the dreams . . . those just might be the worst.

Just this morning, Kevin had awoken before his alarm rang out, sweating and feeling strangely content with the world. Automatically, Kevin's mind started organizing the day: Chemistry at 1000, an 1115 appointment with the Veterans' Advisor, 1230 Spanish II But part of Kevin's mind was still replaying that last dream. Seeing once again that oh so disturbingly pleasant fantasy of running his hands over Michael's bare chest, pulling him close into a tight embrace. Even now, Kevin fought an urge to go see if Michael was awake and wanted to . . . play.

Kevin had, instead, tried to get out of bed, only to have his knee buckle out from under him. The pain had brought tears to Kevin's eyes. He'd sat back on the bed and buried his face in his stuffed bear, Aquila.

For all that he'd only had Aquila for a few years, the bear had quickly become fairly central to Kevin's stability. It had taken nearly twenty months of Physical Therapy for Kevin to recover following the attack. For most of that time, he'd cried out his pain and anguish and despair into Aquila's fur. After so long, Aquila had become something of a fixture in Kevin's rooms. There had never been any question whether or not the bear would follow him to college.

Kevin had shaken his head to clear the cobwebs of reflection. He moved Aquila over between the pillows and wall again, and shoved the band tee he had filched from Michael back under those same pillows. Wide awake from the pain, though still a touch immobilized by his knee, Kevin had levered himself over to his desk and finished up his Chemistry homework.

Kevin had arrived ten minutes early to find his class canceled. There wasn't really any point in walking back across campus to his room, not with an appointment in just

over an hour. So Kevin had gone to the little café in the basement to get some coffee and think.

“That you, Henderson, cuz?”

Kevin had looked up from adulterating his coffee to see Mateo Cruz sitting nearby. He shook his head disbelief; the last time he had seen Cruz had been shortly after the attack. In fact, the last Kevin had seen of his company had been Cruz and two of squad leaders saluting him as the med-evac helo lifted off.

“Cruz, why couldn’t you keep your ugly mug in hiding, huh?” Kevin grinned as dropped into the chair across the other Marine. “How’s classes?”

“Don’t get me started. The only instructor for Practical Physiology is that fag Saunders, and it’s one of those must-takes for Sports Medicine. Worse, damn course’s hands-on. I think that queer teaches it just so he can get his hands on all us buff guys.”

Kevin shook his head, “Probably. Damned fairies keep showing up everywhere. Hell, my damned room-mate turned out to be one. Why can’t they just, I don’t know, die or something? They’re affronts to god and nature, after all.”

Cruz had replied in his usual vulgar, though to the point, manner. Between the rest of that rant and war stories. Kevin hadn’t had much chance to think. Nor had there been much time between the end of classes and Julie’s performance. As if to add insult to injury, Kevin and Michael had entered the lounge just in time for Julie’s set to finish.

“You just missed my set. You promised you’d be here for it, so what do have to say for yourself, soldier boy?”

Kevin grinned, “The word you want is Marine. Soldier is what you call all those other sorry, sad-sack excuses in the infantry. You know, the Army.”

“Come on, Kev, cut her a break. You’re the only one that cares, and besides you’re an ex-Marine now.” Michael had moved in close behind Kevin’s shoulder, the sound of his voice once again sent a pleasant frisson down Kevin’s spine.

Kevin grimaced, “Ex-Marines come in pine boxes. Do I look boxed to you?”

“Not unless ‘boxed’ means totally hot.” Julie grabbed Kevin and hugged him tightly, “You know I don’t mean anything with the ‘soldier’ thing, right?”

Kevin smiled and nodded, “Yea, I do. Besides, you’re cute enough to get away with a lot of stuff.”

Michael pouted ostentatiously, “What, I’m not cute enough to get away with stuff?”

Kevin reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes again, “You’re both more than cute enough to get away with anything you want” Kevin paled, falling into stillness. Abruptly, he spun around and darted out of the room, his ears a bright cherry red still clearly visible as he retreated.

Michael shook his head, “At least he thinks I’m cute. I was afraid he hadn’t even noticed me.”

“I don’t think he plays for that team”

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Kevin crashed back into his room, slamming the door before throwing himself into his desk chair. He flopped back, staring unseeing at the ceiling.

What the hell had that been all about? Why the hell had he said they were both cute? It was true, yes, but he’d intended to never admit that. And what the hell was he going to do about this bizarre attraction to Michael? True, Michael was kind of a good-looking guy, what with his ponytail and narrow hips. Was he prettier than Julie? Could Michael be prettier than Julie? And what if he was?

For that matter, why was he even contemplating how attractive Michael, another guy, was? And so seriously. Almost six years as a Marine, he’d seen the members of his squads and fireteams in practically every state dress. At no point had he ever found himself wanting them, or even dreaming about them. Why was Michael different? And why had a dream that featured Michael wearing a whole lot of nothing been so pleasant?

Then there was Julie. That attraction he could understand; he'd had girlfriends before. And enjoyed it. Well, he was attracted to Julie, so he wasn't gay. Was he? No, no couldn't be, attracted to Julie, who had to be a girl, woman, female. Yeah, Julie was definitely female, nice legs and pert breasts, killer hot face . . . yeah, definitely a woman he wouldn't kick out of bed. Even if she made a mess eating crackers.

But why did he want to get Michael into bed? What did it all mean? And what was he going to do about it? Should he do anything about it?

Lost in his thoughts, Kevin didn't hear the first knock on his door, nor the second. The third was accompanied by demands to open the door and accusations of being present. Thus, Kevin was unsurprised to open the door and see Michael standing there. Julie was a pleasant discovery, though.

"Not that I don't like looking at your butt, hot stuff, but why did you run off on us?" Julie pushed through the door. Kevin retreated, then collapsed at the head of his bed, reaching out to pull Aquila into a tight grip. Shock kept Kevin's voice stilled.

"I'm with Julie, man. It's nice watching you walk away; I'd rather you hung around. So, we came all the way up here, missing out on some killer music, to check up on you. Spill, what was with the Carl Lewis impression?"

Kevin inched up the wall until he could see his guests, though most of his face remained hidden behind the bear. Slowly, he shook his head, declining to speak. Michael sighed, and dropped into the desk chair. Julie dropped cross-legged onto the foot of the bed. She stared at Kevin for several interminably long moments.

"That's pretty cute bear, where'd you get him?"

Kevin shook his head again, "He was given to me when I was still in PT for my leg. Something to hold onto when the pain got really bad, someone I could cry to when it all got to be too much. Uh, why are you two here?"

"You ran off on us, remember? Here I was trying to get to know you better and the first time you show any interest, you split. I can understand playing hard to get, I really do." Michael shifted in his chair, "But if you're going to play that game, there's got to be some get some time, or what's the point of it?"

"Wasn't trying to play hard to get –." Kevin was starting to get angry.

“Bullshit. Or maybe not . . . you might not have been doing it intentionally. But I got to tell you, I’ve got the worst case of frustrated going on. All semester you’ve been hot and cold and mixed messages. Make a decision and stop teasing me.”

Kevin buried his face into his bear, muffling his voice a touch, “God, I don’t know. You would want me to choose.”

“Kevin, honey, look at from our side. Only thing me and Michael know for sure is ain’t but one of us going to get you. Not that I don’t like dreaming about you, but I’d kind of like to know where we stand. And be fair to Michael, don’t keep him hanging, too.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. Seems like I can’t get either of you out of my head, but more so Michael. I keep dreaming about him, I let my mind wander or close my eyes and there he is again. Something, I don’t know what, I’m -- “

Michael stood up and moved to the door, “I’ll try back later; about half his problem is accepting himself. Or not. Either way, until he’s got that figured out, I can’t do anything. Not but I wouldn’t love to, though.” With a slightly salacious sparkle to his eyes, Michael left, closing the door behind him.

Kevin stared at the closed door, “One part of me says chase after him, knock him down, beg him to never leave again. And part of me says ‘Eww, gross! Bad!’ Then there’s the part that says ‘Forget him, the girl is stupid hot, get her.’ And now this. I’m so turned around and inside out “

“You’ve got it bad. I kind of like the ‘get the girl’ idea. But, y’know, biased here. I was going to ask you what you want, but if you knew that we wouldn’t be here, or least not with so many clothes on.”

Kevin couldn’t help himself, he giggled. A touch hysterically perhaps, but a laugh none the less. “God, when did everything get so complicated? And why him?!”

Julie crawled up next to Kevin and hugged him. “You’ve got good taste in men, I’ll give you that. You don’t want him, maybe I’ll go see if he’s interested.”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“Showed up on campus being all hot and Marine-y. It’s pretty sexy; too many of the other guys around spend all their time trying to convince me how tough they are. You, you didn’t even try. Not that you had to. First time I saw you, I knew you’d been there, done that, probably didn’t even bother to get a tee-shirt. You’re probably tougher than any three of those guys, and you just don’t care.”

“Why should I care? I know I can take them if I have to. Just because I can, doesn’t mean I should, or even ought to.” Kevin shrugged, then sighed, “Still doesn’t explain his Hotness out there, though. Twenty-eight years I’ve been on this planet, and suddenly I’m interested in guys? What’s wrong with me?”

“Far as I can see, not a thing. The better question is, what are you going to do, not what’s wrong. Again, biased, but I’d rather have you myself. Seems to me, if you don’t do anything, it can’t be a problem, can it?”

Kevin thought that over for a bit, slowly relaxing a touch. “Still confuses me, but you’ve kind of got a point. What I do matters a lot more. Heck, maybe if I ignore it enough it’ll go away, you think?”

“Got me. I’ve never tried to give up guys before. Not sure I could.”

“Minx.”

Julie grinned, “Here’s a thought: why not invite Mike back and we can try some three-player games. Oh, better yet, I’ll go invite him back. YOU can set everything up.” Julie darted from the room, chasing after Michael.

Kevin shook his head, “I don’t know why she thought that resolved anything, Aquila. Let’s play this one as it lies, hey. After all, I seem to well on my way to getting the girl. I’ll worry about the guy, and whether I want him, some other time. And if I want the girl, I better catch her before she catches the guy . . .”

The band shirt lay underneath the bed, ignored.