



# *Dissonance*

*Senja Spencer*



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*by Sonja Spencer*

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**dis\*so\*nance** [dis-uh-nuhns]—noun. 1. inharmonious or harsh sound; discord; cacophony. 2. *Music*: a. a simultaneous combination of tones conventionally accepted as being in a state of unrest and needing completion. b. an unresolved, discordant chord or interval.

Kent looked up at the slight noise from the doorway. He was working on room assignments for the semester and was almost finished. Glancing to the door, he noticed a tall, slender man standing nervously in the hallway outside his small office. He had long, dark red hair that hung across his face, pale skin, and freckles. Rising, he made his way to the open doorway. "I'm Kent Thomas, Resident Director for the Hensley Building. Can I help you?"

Glancing up at the man's face, Matthias just as quickly dropped his eyes to the assignment sheet he'd been given at the Student Life Office. "I'm Matthias McGaughey," he said quietly, his accent pretty heavy after being at home all summer. "Office told me to come here for a room this year." He hoped he didn't make this guy angry. He was short, but muscular and stocky, and he was bald on top of that. He could probably snap Matthias like a toothpick.

Kent's face lit up at the accent that colored the other man's voice. "You're Irish!" He reached across and patted the younger man on the shoulder. "Yeah, you're on my list for a room in this esteemed dormitory. And since you're the first one here, you get first pick."

Matthias looked up in shock, green eyes wide. "How'd you know that?" he asked.

Kent leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Visited there once," he admitted. "Aw, come on! Don't look so shocked!"

Shaking his head, Matthias did indeed look shocked. "How long were you there?" he said, cocking his head as he looked over the older student.

"Just a month." Kent unfolded his arms and turned to the small refrigerator in the office, pulling a couple of sodas out. Passing one to Matthias, he added, "I bet you like it better at home?" He lifted an eyebrow.

Matthias's eyes got wide again, and he stuttered a little. "Ah, well, I don't get out much. I, uh, study." He looked at the can, cheeks a little flushed, shifting his feet uncomfortably.

"Not thirsty?" Kent opened the drink and handed it back to Matthias. "Drink, before you pass out."

"Uh, yeah," Matthias answered, sipping the soda a little. "It's still cold at home," he said quietly, voice sort of weak.

"Ah, yeah. I remember them telling me about the deep winters." Kent settled back in the seat behind his desk, propping his Converse-clad feet on the desk. "Have a seat."

Moving without looking where he was going, Matthias shuffled into the chair, almost dropping his backpack as he tried to regain his balance, and then he sat down hard, splashing soda on his hand. He tried to lick up the rivulets on his skin before they hit the floor.

Kent's eyes dilated at the flash of tongue he saw. He dropped to the floor, helping Matthias immediately. "Wasn't

quite what I meant by 'have a seat'." He grinned, taking a closer look at Matthias.

Matthias's eyes darted nervously up to see the other student smiling at him, and he froze, although he let Kent help him into the chair. "Ah ... yeah, I mean, thanks," he murmured, cheeks flushing again. He ducked his head, long hair covering his face.

Kent noticed the extreme shyness and reined in his interest. His hand lingered on Matthias's shoulder. "Hey, it's okay."

Relaxing a little, Matthias chanced a look up again, his tongue darting out nervously to dampen his lower lip. When all he saw from Kent was a smile, he relaxed a little more and sat up some.

"It's great having you here," Kent spoke softly, afraid of spooking the younger man. He almost reached up and smoothed a stray lock of hair away, but stopped himself at the last moment.

Seeing Kent's hand lift, Matthias reacted instinctively, flinching and leaning back, eyes turning fearful. His hands gripped the chair arms, and he shifted his weight so if he needed to move quickly to protect himself, he could.

Kent's heart stopped at seeing the reaction he received from Matthias. Instead he lowered his hand to the young man's shoulder once more. "It's okay," he repeated again.

Slowly the fear abated and Matthias relaxed again, although he seemed to remain ready to flee. "Maybe I should come back another time," he murmured, looking down at the sheet. It wasn't that he had anywhere else to go, but he

wasn't sure what he thought about Kent yet. At least the other man hadn't made fun of him, or worse. Yet. Matthias figured it was just a matter of time.

"No, no. Let me show you the rooms. You can pick the one you want." Kent led the skittish young man out of the office on the ground floor. He pointed to a door near the bottom of the stairs. "That's my room. There's only one other residence room down here. In the back of the house, there's a vending room."

Matthias let Kent lead him out of the small office, and he felt better when they were moving about. His eyes narrowed as he considered. A ground-floor room, no others nearby but the RD.... It sounded very tempting. "Won't some upperclassman want the private room?" Matthias asked, not wanting to get into the situation he'd suffered last year. He'd paid for a private room this year, but that didn't mean he could take the prime location on the ground floor.

"Nobody wants to be right next to the RD." Kent laughed. "At least not any of these guys. They're all pretty decent, but they'd rather be upstairs, away from the hall monitor."

Matthias frowned a little, but looked at the door longingly. No one to kick the door every time they walked by, no one to pile trash in front of his door. "Can ... may I see the room?" Matthias asked quietly.

Kent led him to the room, unlocking it. "It's smaller than the other rooms, but it's meant to be a single room. They took part of the two rooms and made a janitor's closet. It has a private bathroom too."

The younger student's face turned even more longing, if that were possible. A private bath! His hands gripped his backpack until his knuckles turned white. It was a dream come true! Then he looked to the floor, trying not to get his hopes up, reminding himself that nothing in America ever came for free. "So what do I have to do?" he asked cautiously, steeling himself.

Kent named an easy task. "Agree to help me lock the place down each night?"

Matthias glanced up at Kent, blank. "Lock the place down?"

"Curfew is at two a.m. I usually set my alarm and get up long enough to lock the doors. Think you can handle that?"

The student blinked. "Is that all?" he blurted out, incredulous. He was never asleep before three, at the earliest. But surely the RD would demand some other form of payment for Matthias's board.

"That's all. And you have to talk to me. Let me hear that accent that reminds me of days spent in Ireland, out in the moors and the mist." Kent smiled at Matthias.

Matthias looked at the RD in wonder, and then narrowed his eyes, looking around. "What are you going to want later?" he asked. "And who else will get the key to my room?"

Kent held his hands up in supplication. "There are only two keys to this room. You have one, the other stays in a lock box in my room in case of lockouts or emergencies." He was stung by the implications of Matthias's words. "I don't expect anything from you, Matthias. All I ask of my neighbor is that he be relatively quiet and hold his companion's moans to a tolerable level."



Studying Kent, Matthias decided he really wanted to believe him. And it wasn't as if he had a lot of choice. He couldn't go back to Potter Hall. And at least here, even if ... at least here, he would have this room and a private bathroom. "All right," he whispered, eyes dropping.

Kent dipped his chin to try to catch Matthias's eyes. "I don't know what you're expecting to happen here, Matthias, but these are a decent group of guys. Most of them are back from last year, already got their rooms and their classes. They keep to themselves. They help when needed. They won't be upset that you chose this room. They won't bother you."

Matthias looked back up, and he hunched a little as he saw how close Kent was, but he listened and then slowly nodded. "All right," he said again, in more of a normal voice this time.

Kent noticed the defensive movement and sighed as he stepped back again. "I just wanna be your friend, Matthias. If we're going to be neighbors, we should try to get along."

Straightening his shoulders, Matthias nodded. "I agree," he said quietly. "I'm not usually the one—" He closed his mouth, remembering what happened last time he tried to shift the blame for his problems on the other residents. "I won't be any problem. I'll lock the doors and whatever else you want. If I can have this room," he said, bargaining.

"Okay then. Need help with your bags?" Kent moved toward the doorway, already taking the key off the master key ring.

Matthias shook his head. "My bag's in the foyer," he said, walking behind Kent slowly, not rushing him.

Kent stepped to the side, passing Matthias the key as he walked past. "You've got run of the house until next Thursday. Explore all you want."

Watching Kent move on, Matthias folded the key in his hand and followed out to the lobby where his one suitcase stood. He stopped to look at the bulletin board, surprised at the hand-drawn notices and colorful signs.

"See anything you need on the board?" Kent asked, lingering.

Matthias blinked, surprised that Kent was still nearby. "Just surprised to see it. Good info here. Helpful," he said, shrugging a little. "I never did find the change machine in Potter," he muttered.

"Just inside the vending room here." Kent nodded toward the back of the house. "Like a tour?"

Matthias looked back at his bag, concerned about leaving it out where anyone could take it. It wasn't much, but it was all he had.

Following the direction of Matthias's gaze, Kent shrugged. "You can leave it in your room. Nobody will bother it there, even if you leave your door unlocked." He doubted anyone else would even set foot in the dorm that day, but he didn't mention it.

Considering for a moment, Matthias retrieved his case and set it in his room, and then after another pause, set it inside the closet and shut the closet door, then the room door. He looked at the key in his hand and then reopened the door, put down his backpack and shut the door, locking it. He turned back to Kent, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Kent watched the actions thoughtfully, wondering what could have happened to the obviously distrustful young man to make him so ... distrustful.

Matthias looked up when he didn't notice Kent move away. "Ah, yeah, a tour?" he asked, thinking that maybe the RD had changed his mind.

Kent shook himself out of his thoughts. "Come on." He led the other man toward the back of the house, pointing out the laundry room. Just across the hallway from the laundry room was the vending room. "There's no common room here, since most guys have their own TV. Not like when they first built the building, you know?"

Looking around silently, Matthias imagined it would be a lot quieter in this dorm. At Potter, the guys gathered in the common rooms and raised a ruckus at all hours. He'd eventually gotten used to tuning it out. He looked sideways at Kent, relaxing a little more. The man had been nothing but nice.

"Hensley is one of the most easygoing dorms you'll find," Kent continued, leading Matthias upstairs. "There are four rooms on this floor and four on the top floor. Each room houses two students. That gives us total capacity, including us, of eighteen."

Matthias blinked. He hadn't expected the dorm to be so small. "I didn't realize," he said. "Potter had about eighty guys."

"This is an elite dorm, being in one of the historical buildings," Kent answered. "Reserved for upperclassmen who're set in their major and got top grades in both

academics and extracurriculars. What's your major, Matthias?"

Matthias's eyes got wide, and he looked upset. "But I'm not an upperclassman. I'm not supposed to be here," he said, voice worried.

"You're on my list, Matthias McGaughey. You're a year older than our average student, right?" At Matthias's nod, Kent continued. "You received four-point-ohs in *all* your courses last term. You were first on my list."

Matthias relaxed a little, blowing out a breath in relief. "Uh. Yeah. I'm a music major," he murmured.

"Will you need instruments? There's a piano in the storage room. Used to be in the lobby." Kent smiled at the thought of hearing music throughout the house.

Matthias's eyes grew large, and his face lit up. "There's a piano here?" His hands itched. It had been a couple days since he'd gotten to play because he'd been traveling.

"Sure, it just needs dusting off. We can wheel it into the main room, if you'd like." Kent was heartened to see the joy cross Matthias's face. "You're more than welcome to it."

The student's excitement overwhelmed his usual shyness and even his hard-learned caution. "Can ... may I see it? Now?" Matthias asked, almost vibrating.

"Sure!" Kent led Matthias back to the very back room of the building, unlocking the door and reaching inside to turn on the dim light. Sweeping a dust cover off of the big piano, he moved to the side.

Matthias's jaw dropped. A grand piano! Sitting in a closet! And a gorgeous one, if a little dusty. He reached out and

lifted the lid, checking the strings, and then carefully dropped it, reaching for the keys. His fingers trilled over the keys, hearing a few sour notes, but nothing he couldn't fix. He glanced to the wide double doors of the storage room, seeing how the piano had been rolled in. "Why did they put it in here?" he asked.

"It was donated to the dorm a few years back. Nobody has been able to play it since then. We thought it'd be safer here," Kent answered.

"So no one uses it? And I can?" he asked again, just unable to believe it. "But what about the noise? Not everyone likes piano, and some guys sleep early, and others might not want to hear it, and—"

"Most of them are out until curfew. They won't mind." Kent promised him. "And there's still a week before they arrive. You can tune it and play to your heart's content."

Unable to believe his luck, Matthias looked down at the piano and then to Kent. "Thank you," he murmured. "Whatever you want, I'll do it," he said, dropping his head, hand still on the piano lid.

"I just want to see a smile on your face," Kent mused out loud.

Matthias's head flew up, and he looked at the RD in surprise. Kent flushed, and Matthias thought it was a humanizing look on such a tough-looking guy.

"Sorry," Kent offered.

"Uh," Matthias said, swallowing, amazed. "Sorry?" he asked softly.

"Shouldn't have spoken so plainly. I'm sure there are reasons, which are none of my business..." Kent fairly stuttered.

Blinking, Matthias was suddenly taken with the urge to laugh. Suddenly this rough man reminded him of a big teddy bear. His lips curled slightly, and he tilted his head, peering at the RD, wondering. "What's your major?" he asked out of the blue, curious.

"Sports medicine?" Kent nearly asked, sounding impossibly unsure.

A little furrow formed between Matthias's brows. "You don't seem too sure about that."

Shaking out of his stupor, Kent chuckled. "I'd better be sure. I'm starting grad school this year."

Matthias smiled slightly. "Congratulations," he said quietly.

Kent preened in the other man's attention. It wasn't often people recognized him for his academic efforts. "You said you aren't an upperclassman yet. Did you take a vacation before coming to school?"

Shaking his head, Matthias's mouth twitched. "No, I was on tour in Europe," he said quietly, looking back at the piano shyly.

"Actually on tour? I'm impressed." Kent was awed by Matthias's experiences.

The musician smiled crookedly, practically petting the piano. "It was interesting, but exhausting. I don't think I'd care to perform all the time," he said, carefully looking up at Kent from under his long hair.

Kent wanted to push the hair away, but after the reaction he'd received earlier, he turned his attention to the piano once more. "Do you think we can move it by ourselves?"

Matthias glanced under the piano, checking the wheels, and he nodded. "It looks to be in fine shape," he said. "It should roll fine if we push."

Kent propped the double doors open and walked around behind the piano. "Ready?"

Moving around to the curve of the piano, Matthias nodded. "If you're sure we should move it."

Remembering the joy on Matthias's face, Kent smiled widely. "Sure thing. I expect you to entertain me with lovely melodies while I finish the room assignments."

Matthias smiled. Such a funny sentiment. Who'd have thought this guy would like music? Kent pushed, and the piano moved easily across the threshold as Matthias helped steer it. Once in place at one side of the lobby, Matthias locked down the casters and lifted the lid of the piano, propping it up.

Kent wiped at the dust as Matthias began fiddling beneath the lid. "Think it's worth it?"

Engrossed in checking strings, Matthias had pulled his hair into a knot at the nape of his neck. "What? Oh, yes, it's in real good shape, just needs a tune," he said distractedly, plucking strings and turning pegs. "Got some pliers?" he asked.

Kent went to his office and dug around the toolbox under his desk. He came back with a pair, watching as Matthias

started twisting pegs. "I'm glad you know what you're doing. This is why it's been in storage the last two years."

"It's not that hard," Matthias said, head stuck under the lid as he plucked strings.

"I know good music when I hear it," Kent countered, leaning inside to see what Matthias was doing. "But I've got no idea how to make it."

Matthias plucked each string, his head turned so that his ear was down next to the sound. He plucked, listened, then tightened the string, then plucked again. He did it over and over, from the highest notes down, until he had to stop to move to the other end of the keyboard.

Kent watched the process, fascinated, but even more intrigued at the confidence that flooded Matthias's features when he completed the task.

As the tones got lower, Matthias started humming to himself, a few octaves above the note he was working on, still plucking, oblivious to everything else around him. He was immersed in his own little world of perfect pitches and tones as heard inside his head.

As Matthias neared his position, Kent moved, not wanting to be in the way. Matthias brushed past him, keeping at the strings, still humming, the low rumbling in his throat moving up and down the scale until he was done. He straightened, offering the pliers back. "Thanks," he said.

Kent stood entranced, watching the man who'd changed in the blink of an eye. "You're welcome," he murmured.



Heading back to the closet, Matthias came back out with the bench and sat it down, taking a seat and folding up the cover and music stand. "Any requests?" he asked.

"Do you have songs of your own?" Kent asked.

Matthias looked at the RD evenly, then turned to the keyboard and started playing a lyrical, always-moving tune that to him recalled the rolling moors where he grew up. The tune circled over and over, growing in intensity, before segueing into a short, light interlude.

Kent sat on the floor, cross-legged. He closed his eyes as he listened, a smile growing on his face at the perfection of the piece. When it ended, he sat in silence for several long moments, simply savoring the echoes of the tune. Opening his eyes, he met Matthias's gaze fully. "That was great."

Matthias smiled, genuinely, not blushing. In this, he was confident. "Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Kent was getting used to hearing the haunting melodies Matthias liked to play. The music punctuated his moods, making him work harder and longer, and he finished his paperwork earlier than ever. He stood in the open doorway of his office, watching Matthias's long fingers as they danced over the keys.

Matthias decided to enjoy the solitude in the hall and practice there as much as possible before the other residents arrived. Then, he knew, he'd spend more time hiking across campus to the Performing Arts Center. But for now, he could play at all hours. Kent hadn't commented once, and he felt

relatively at ease with playing what and when he wanted. He stopped mid-stanza and scowled, having missed the progression for the third time, so he grabbed a pencil and started marking, slowly playing notes with one hand.

Kent took the pause in music to approach the piano, perching on the end of the piano bench. There was plenty of room, he noticed wryly. Matthias was awfully skinny. "What do all of those mark thingies mean?"

Turning his chin to look at Kent in surprise, Matthias pushed his glasses up his nose, looking back at the music. "Well, I'm breaking down the music. Into smaller parts, so I can get it right," he explained, fingers still lightly touching a set of keys, making a soft chime.

Kent placed his fingers in an imitation of Matthias's, sliding his arm beneath Matthias's to place them on the keys beneath Matthias's fingers. It was the closest he'd been to the other man. He pressed his hand down, smiling at the soft note that followed.

Though his shoulders stiffened a little, Matthias didn't pull away. He slanted a glance Kent's way, and then lightly pressed down his fingers onto Kent's, tapping out the quiet melody. His fingers were long and narrow compared to the thick, calloused digits under them.

The closeness and heat of Matthias's body made Kent relax, fingers and hands perfectly pliant beneath Matthias's. "Beautiful," he murmured.

Putting his left hand back on the keyboard, Matthias repeated the stanza slowly, adding the bass clef line, pressing Kent's fingers down again.

Kent turned to Matthias, smiling up at him. He studied Matthias's face for several long moments before turning back to the piano once more. "Beautiful," he repeated.

The musician shrugged. "It's Schubert. Everything Schubert did is like this. He was one of the first Romantics," Matthias said, pulling his hand from Kent's to keep playing, though slowly and quietly. Any time he needed the key Kent's finger was on, he pressed Kent's finger onto the key and moved on without effort.

Looking up with a mischievous grin, Kent exclaimed, "I'm playing *Schubert*?"

Matthias turned his chin so he could look at Kent, smile pulling at the edges of his mouth. "You know Schubert?" he asked, voice doubtful.

"No?" Kent half-asked, half-answered. "But I made you smile. I like what I hear so far."

The younger student actually cracked a grin at Kent's joking. "Well, you must have refined tastes then, liking a classical composer."

"I like you too," Kent added in a lower voice. "I've grown quite fond of you the last several days."

Blinking, Matthias's hands stilled on the keyboard, and he looked at Kent cautiously. "This is the first time I've seen you since I moved in," he objected quietly.

"Doesn't mean I haven't been watching. Or listening."

The musician pulled his hands off the keys, clutching them together nervously. "You're ... you're watching me?" he asked, voice tinged with panic as he started to shift his weight to move away.

Kent regretted admitting it, but knew he couldn't leave it at that. "You're beautiful. I love watching you get lost in your music. It's full of passion. You are, too, but you try to hide it. You're ... delicate. Like your hands on the keys."

Unnerved, Matthias scooted off the piano bench to put some space between them, although he didn't flee. Kent hadn't threatened him, too much, and Matthias really wanted to believe he had a friend in him. "The passion is in the music," he finally said.

"It's in you," Kent countered, moving out of Matthias's territory. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to frighten you, but I think you're gorgeous."

Matthias's eyes got really big, and he just stared at the other man. He'd been teased, tortured, laughed at, and ignored, but no one had ever flat out said something like that, except when they were talking about his performance. "Uh. Well. Thanks," he muttered, looking at his hands.

"I'm just telling you the truth," Kent forged on.

The musician looked up, studying Kent's face, which was scrunched up in effort, the man obviously searching for the right words. Matthias smiled slightly. "What kind of music do you like?" he asked, moving slowly back to slide onto the piano bench.

"I like anything you play. Especially that first song you played for me."

Matthias frowned, trying to remember, then his brows raised and he played a bit of that piece. "This one?" he asked.

"*That* one." Kent nodded enthusiastically, leaning on the piano to feel the music reverberate through the instrument.

"I wrote this two summers ago, when I first left Ireland for continental Europe, and I really missed home," Matthias said, starting at the beginning of the music. "I live on the moors, much like ones you probably saw, and I think I miss the rolling hills and quiet of it most of all."

"I loved that vacation," Kent admitted wistfully. "Maybe that's why I like this so much." He listened to the melody, eyes closed. "People thought I was nuts, that I couldn't appreciate something beautiful like a countryside."

Not sure what to make of Kent's last comment, Matthias asked the safer question. "Where are you from?"

"Born and raised in New York City," Kent answered amiably. "Do you go home a lot?"

Matthias frowned. "No. Just in the summer, although my agent tells me I should tour instead."

"I was hoping to go home this summer, but there was a course I had to pick up." Kent looked at Matthias thoughtfully. "I have some photos in my room. Have you ever been to New York? Want to see?"

Still playing, Matthias nodded, figuring it the friendly thing to do. Kent hadn't made any overt moves, after all.

Kent made no move to lead Matthias away from the piano, choosing instead to listen to the rest of the song. Finishing the piece, the musician looked up and then frowned a little. He'd thought Kent was going to get some pictures, but instead he'd lingered to listen.

When the piece ended, Kent nodded toward his room. "Come with?"

Matthias's first reaction was to decline immediately. But Kent's friendliness so far was helping him be more trusting. He just hoped he didn't regret it. He slid off the bench and stood, ready to walk after him.

He followed Kent into his room. It was really three rooms in the corner of the house, with windows in two of them. Mostly the walls were empty, although there were photos tacked up on bulletin boards in the living room and small kitchen, and he saw some on a closed door, which he figured led to the bedroom. Kent motioned to the braided rug that covered the hardwood floor in front of the comfortable-looking sofa. "Let's spread out on the floor."

Watching Kent move around, Matthias sank down on the rug cross-legged, near the door, his back to the wall. His eyes darted around as he checked for doors or places someone could hide to ... then he shook his head. Kent wouldn't do that. Wouldn't lead him to his room to tease him or so his friends could.... Matthias inhaled sharply and looked to locate Kent again.

Kent sat near enough to Matthias to feel his warmth, but far enough away to hopefully make the other man as comfortable as possible. He reached beneath his couch, pulling out a bin holding two photo albums. He placed one on the floor in front of them, flipping it open to the first page. "This is home."

Leaning over and then scooting a bit closer so he could see, Matthias smiled, looking at the older couple—Kent's parents, he guessed—waving from the porch of a nice suburban home.

Kent flipped through a page or two, pointing out people and places of interest. Sighing heavily, he braced his elbow on his knee. "I miss it."

"I always wondered what it was like to live in the city. Then I spent the summer in Europe. That was scary," Matthias admitted. "I don't think I'd like it too well."

"We spent summers out on Grandpa's farm upstate," Kent recalled. "I liked it better there than in the city. Everyone's always hurrying in the city." He turned and looked up at Matthias, noticing his interest in the photos. "What do you miss most?"

The younger student sighed. "I miss being relaxed. Being able to take your time. Seems like everyone and everything in America is always in a hurry."

Kent's face lit up. "Tell you what. For the next four days, let's just lock the doors and forget the outside world. We'll pretend we're back in Ireland, and there's nowhere to go and no place to be."

Matthias looked up at Kent like he'd gone crazy. "Pretend we're in Ireland?"

Kent shrugged. "Why not? There's a fenced-in lawn out back. A high security board fence. Hammock. Pool. We can just laze about."

The musician perked up. "There's a pool out back?" He hadn't even thought to look around outside yet.

Kent nodded enthusiastically. "I'm usually so busy I don't get to use it. I'm sorry I hadn't thought about it yet."

Matthias looked intrigued. "What are we going to do for food?" he asked. He'd been eating crackers and cereal for two

days already, eating as cheap as he could until the dining hall opened.

Kent pulled his planner from the bedside table, flipping it open to a list of campus restaurants. "I get discounts for working so early. You're welcome to share."

"You don't have to do that. I can run out to the store," Matthias said, internally wincing, thinking of how much money he had.

"No, I gotta eat anyway, and I usually order too much," Kent insisted, waving at his stout body. "Please, you'll be doing me a favor. The leftovers go bad otherwise."

"Well, if you're sure there's plenty, that would be fine," Matthias said quietly. "I eat pretty much anything."

"I hope you like pizza and Chinese food. Those are my favorites." Kent grinned.

Matthias chuckled. "I've not found food yet I don't like." He looked down again at the pictures, then up at Kent and around the room. It was tidy and nicely decorated. Comfortable. A far cry from Matthias's stark, empty room.

Noticing Matthias's glance around the room, Kent shrugged. "You can come in here anytime you want. I've got TV and cable too."

The musician looked surprised. "I wouldn't presume," he murmured. "I don't watch TV. Usually practicing."

"Matthias? Are we friends?" Kent asked, head cocked to the side.

Looking up slowly, Matthias met Kent's serious eyes and gave the question some thought. After a bit, he nodded



slowly. "Yeah," he said, almost too quietly to hear. "I'd like to be."

"Then what's mine is yours." Kent smiled widely. "I want us to be friends. I get along with a lot of people, but I don't have any close friends."

Charmed by Kent's happy smile, Matthias smiled a bit in return before shrugging. "I don't make friends easily. Usually too busy practicing, and...." He shrugged again. "I don't seem to get along too well with some people."

Kent patted Matthias's knee. "It's okay to be shy. Just remember I'm not. I want to be your friend, so I'm going to be around."

Matthias couldn't stop from flinching when Kent touched his knee, but he managed to keep from scooting back instinctively as his highly strung nerves warned him someone was getting too close. He looked up at Kent almost apologetically and hoped he wasn't offended.

Kent sighed inwardly, but understood the need for distance. "If you ever wanna talk, I'll listen."

Drawing a steadying breath, Matthias took a chance. "I'm sorry. It's not you; please believe me."

"I believe you. I don't know who's hurt you, but I wish I could strangle them," Kent spoke quietly, hoping his words wouldn't frighten Matthias.

Edging a shoulder up, Matthias shook his head. "At least I don't live there anymore," he mumbled.

A wave of anger washed over Kent that anyone would hurt this gentle man. He dared anyone to touch Matthias again while he was around. "I won't ever hurt you, Matthias."

Dissonance  
*by Sonja Spencer*

This time Matthias didn't flinch and his shoulders relaxed, and he met Kent's eyes evenly, just studying him.

\* \* \* \*

Matthias sat at his desk, marking a new piece of music, when he heard something glass crash in the lobby. Blinking in surprise, he stood and walked over to the door, peeking out.

Kent froze, cursing himself for not thinking to put on shoes before changing the bulb in the light fixture near the door. He stood with shards of thin glass all around him, not daring to move. "Um ... Matthias?" He called out, intending to ask for a broom.

Seeing the situation, Matthias came out of his room, shaking his head. "Don't move," he cautioned. He ducked back into his room to grab his Crocs, and reemerged to step through the shards, crunching over the glass.

"Be careful," Kent cautioned. "It's everywhere."

"What were you thinking, doing this with no shoes on?" Matthias asked, stopping nearby.

Kent tilted his head. "That I wouldn't drop the damned bulb?" he asked, tone holding a trace of joking sarcasm.

Rolling his eyes, Matthias set the Crocs down in front of Kent, who thankfully shoved his feet in as much as they'd go into the too-small shoes. But it was enough, and they picked their way over to Kent's door.

"My hero," Kent swooned dramatically, tossing his head back and placing his hand against his forehead. "I owe you my life."

Boggling, Matthias stared at Kent. The playacting looked absolutely ridiculous on him. Surely he couldn't be serious.

Kent chuckled. "Thanks. How does someone as tall as you have such tiny feet, man?" He kicked out of Matthias's Crocs, shoved his feet into his own shoes, and grabbed his DustBuster. "I guess I'd better clean up my mess before someone gets hurt."

Glancing back to the lobby, Matthias's smile fell a little. "Are people checking in today?" he asked warily.

"Not until morning," Kent replied. "Dorms officially open at eleven a.m. tomorrow."

Matthias relaxed a little and nodded. "Just let me know when I need to start helping," he murmured, shifting his weight back and forth.

Padding back into the lobby, Kent joked over his shoulder, "We should have a private pool party tonight. Celebrate our last night of virtual freedom."

Raising an eyebrow, Matthias trailed along behind Kent. They'd been hanging out quite a bit the past few days, a lot of the time not even talking, just sitting together outside or swimming or reading or eating. Matthias felt pretty comfortable around him now and didn't look forward to more people being around. "Sounds good," he agreed easily.

"Gonna lose the T-shirt tonight when you swim?" Kent teased gently as he plugged in the DustBuster and readied it for use.

Matthias rolled his eyes, used to Kent's ribbing. "Probably not," he answered as usual. He just wasn't comfortable enough with anyone to strip down that far. It made him feel

too vulnerable. Although he had certainly spent time looking at Kent. He was a lot to look at. Not fat, but certainly not shapely. Just ... big. It made him almost cringe if he let himself think about it. The other guys had been big too.

"Awww, come on. I won't bite." Kent wagged his brows. "Not unless you ask me to." He switched on the hand sweeper, bending to suction up the glass as he left Matthias to think about his last remark.

Blinking several times, Matthias stared at Kent, trying to figure out if he was serious. Finally, he decided Kent was pulling his leg; he had a wild sense of humor. He watched Kent sweep up the glass with the DustBuster before crossing back to his room to change clothes. "Have you had dinner?" he asked once Kent shut off the machine.

Winding the cord around the small appliance, Kent shook his head before realizing Matthias couldn't see him from his room. "No. You want anything in particular?"

Shucking his jeans and pulling on his shorts he used for swimming, Matthias considered. Kent more often than not talked him into choosing, even though Matthias protested since Kent more often than not paid. "Um. How about Indian?"

Kent's head perked up at the mention of Indian food. "I've never had it. Can you order while I change? I'm guessing you know what's okay to eat, right?"

Matthias stuck his head out the door to look at Kent. "You sure about that? Indian can be spicy," he cautioned.

"I like things hot and spicy," Kent said with his trademark grin. "And I trust you. Something tells me that you won't

order something fiery just to watch me turn red." He paused. "Or at least I hope you wouldn't."

Frowning a little, Matthias was disappointed Kent would think that. "I wouldn't do that to you," he said quietly, hand gripping the doorframe.

Kent looked up from where he fastened the cord on the DustBuster. "I said I trust you."

Tilting his head to lay it against the doorframe, Matthias watched Kent for a long moment. "All right," he said. "Indian it is." He disappeared into his room to make the phone call for delivery.

Kent took the opportunity to change into his swim trunks, pulling on a pair of loose and floppy black trunks and a tank top before grabbing his towel and clomping back into the lobby. Standing in the doorway of Matthias's room, he watched as Matthias gathered his own towel. "You ready?"

Having pulled on his T-shirt as he ordered the food, Matthias nodded, throwing a towel over his shoulder. "Dinner will be here in half an hour," he said. "I told him to ring the bell at the front door."

As they headed back to the pool, Kent asked, "Be lazy now? Swimming later?" The sun was starting to go down, casting a warm glow over the outdoor setting and throwing sun-sparkles off of the surface of the pool.

Looking at the sunset, Matthias stretched, his arms up in the air above his head. "Let's swim first, while it's still warm. We can lounge while we eat."

Kent shrugged, pulling his tank top over his head before jumping into the deep end of the pool with a huge splash and swimming a lap. "Coming?" he asked.

As always, Matthias waited and watched, taking a few moments to look at the man who had become his friend and wonder if he might make things different. Lost in thought about what might have been if he'd met Kent last year, Matthias was caught watching when Kent swam up and spoke to him. To cover for his lapse, Matthias dropped his towel, kicked off his Crocs, and dove in.

Kent watched the graceful dive, drifting near the edge of the pool as he waited for Matthias to surface.

Breaking the surface of the water halfway down the pool, Matthias swam to the shallow end, flipped over and swam back in long, easy strokes, stopping at the deep end where he started and slicked his hair back, looking around for Kent.

"Over here," Kent's voice was low and husky, an unidentified element coming through in the raspy tone.

Turning in the water as one hand held to the end of the pool, Matthias turned to see Kent bathed in the red light of sunset. He swallowed hard. Kent's voice had sounded deeper, somehow. Matthias wondered what he was thinking about.

"I..." Kent started to speak, but thought better of it. He moved slightly closer, Matthias's beauty drawing him like a moth to the flame. "I ... I'm afraid to get too close to you, Matthias. I don't want to scare you. I know I intimidate you sometimes because I'm so...." He gestured to himself wryly.

Matthias tilted his head as he listened, considering. He felt more comfortable with Kent than he had with anyone for a

long time. Although, he did wonder why Kent would want to be closer, unless he just wanted to talk quietly. Matthias didn't believe Kent had anything threatening in mind. So he moved closer in the water, close enough Kent could extend his arm and touch him, he if wanted. "I know I'm ... withdrawn ... around people," he admitted apologetically.

"I know you got your reasons," Kent encouraged Matthias, edging even closer in the water. "What I don't get is how anyone would think of harming someone as beautiful as you."

Eyes wide, the musician watched the other man with some bit of wonder. "Beautiful?" he murmured, slightly shaking his head. "I don't know about that. Regardless, my looks didn't have much to do with it."

"Sweet?" Kent tried, seeing Matthias's eyes grow wider. "I like you, Matthias. I guess I've mentioned it often enough, I would have thought...." His voice trailed off as he turned and looked at the sunset, afraid of what Matthias would see in his eyes if he looked at him.

Matthias could feel his heart pounding. He trusted Kent more than he'd trusted anyone since last year. Kent had done everything possible to make Matthias comfortable and welcome around him. And now he'd complimented him. Truly complimented him. Swallowing hard, Matthias reached out with a trembling hand and lightly touched Kent's shoulder.

Kent turned back at the gentle touch, lifting his hand to cover Matthias's. "I wish I could just make it all better for you. I wish I could just make you trust again." He lowered his eyes, not daring to look at Matthias as he added with a sad sigh, "I wish I could just kiss you."

Resisting the gut urge to draw back, to run away, Matthias shivered in the water, looking at Kent's downturned face. "No one's ever wanted to kiss me before," he said, voice shaking a little.

"I don't know why not," Kent murmured. He looked up to meet Matthias's eyes. "You're gorgeous."

Feeling both thrilled and frightened, Matthias met Kent's gaze. "You can," he whispered. "If you really want to."

Kent lifted his hands to frame Matthias's face, giving the other man plenty of opportunity to back away if he needed to, as he approached. His stubby fingers were thick on Matthias's delicate bones, and Kent was almost afraid to touch him. At first he nuzzled Matthias's jaw, nose brushing the faint dark red stubble on the younger man's cheek. His body soaked in the contact, demanding more. His lips touched the water-chilled skin near Matthias's mouth.

Letting his eyes fall closed, Matthias trembled as he felt the lightest press of Kent's lips. Then again. Each time he relaxed a tiny bit, becoming accustomed to Kent's proximity and the rush of heat through him at each touch of the other man's mouth.

Kent's fingers fanned along Matthias's neck, pulling his head gently down, thumbs stroking gently at the corners of his lips as he finally pressed a soft kiss to the shaking man's mouth.

Matthias raised both hands to lightly touch Kent's shoulders, but he didn't push him away. Instead, shaking like a leaf, he let Kent kiss him and the undercurrent of warmth



soak through him. He slowly relaxed and the trembling stilled as he decided he liked the touch of Kent's lips.

As Kent moved his lips over Matthias's, his hands moved down, grasping Matthias's shoulders and holding him steady. He prayed that whatever had bothered Matthias in the past didn't involve holding him, and that the younger man wouldn't be spooked by the action.

Focusing on feeling Kent's kiss, Matthias moaned softly. He stiffened slightly when Kent's hands closed about his shoulders, but when Kent didn't try to push him against the wall, he relaxed again. He sighed softly against Kent's mouth, almost encouraging him.

When Matthias sighed, Kent's tongue slipped into his mouth, tasting sweetly and slowly. Matthias gasped as Kent's tongue slid against his, and he pulled back before he could stop himself, looking at Kent in surprise.

"I'm sorry!" Kent moved away from Matthias, thinking he'd offended or scared the other man. He didn't know what would be worse.

"No!" Matthias blurted, catching Kent's arm. "Uh ... sorry," he murmured, blushing a little. "You just surprised me, is all," he said, pulling his hand back in case Kent still wanted to leave.

"No?" Kent asked, a touch of surprise in his tone. He moved closer again. "You didn't mind it?" Matthias shyly shook his head. Kent's hand slid along Matthias's arm, catching on the wet T-shirt. "You don't mind if I do it again?" He found he didn't mind looking up at someone to kiss them, as long as it was Matthias.

Watching with wary but welcoming eyes, Matthias shook his head again. Kent sighed as he leaned forward once more. Just before his lips touched Matthias's, he whispered, "Why don't you kiss me instead?"

Eyes widening, Matthias's lips trembled, and he swallowed hard. "I ... I don't know how," he whispered, his hand on the edge of the pool gripping so tightly that his knuckles were white.

Recognizing the loss of comfort—or what comfort there had been—Kent pressed a soft kiss to Matthias's lips before moving to float at the edge of the pool near him. Bobbing on the surface of the water, Kent pretended to be nonchalant. "You're very good at it, you know." He didn't try to hide the effect the kiss had on his body.

Cheeks flushing a little, Matthias ducked his head, but watched Kent float so close by. "You think so?" he asked quietly, letting his eyes roam over the lips that had just pressed against his.

Kent hummed. "A natural." His strong legs kicked slightly to keep him in place near Matthias. "You can practice on me anytime," he offered, grinning.

Relaxing even more, Matthias smiled back openly, without his usual pause and reserved choice. Kent made him feel confident. "What about now?" he asked before biting his tongue, figuring Kent would laugh.

Letting his arms float outward in a gesture of willingness, Kent smiled. "I'm all yours."

Matthias's heart thumped loudly in his chest as he stepped close, his side brushing Kent's arm, and after bolstering his

courage, he leaned over and pressed a light, sweet kiss to Kent's lips. Kent opened to the exploring kiss, enjoying the sweetness and innocence. He attempted turning in the water, bracing his hands on Matthias's arm until his feet touched bottom, and he was once again upright.

Carefully pressing their lips together, Matthias continued the kiss as Kent moved, and unthinking, he settled his hands on wet skin: one on Kent's shoulder, the other at his waist. Matthias's head was light with the feeling of acceptance, comfort, and caring.

Kent's hands on Matthias's arm guided it tighter around his waist, moving closer in the circle of his arms even as he opened his mouth under Matthias's gentle assault. He sighed happily, the gentle exhale caught within Matthias's mouth. Matthias hadn't consciously noticed he was a handful of inches taller than Kent until now, when he deliberately bent his head to kiss him. And when Kent moved closer in his arms, their body heat combined, and Matthias shivered. It was warm and wonderful and unlike anything he'd ever felt.

Kent didn't quite know what to do with his hands. He wanted to touch Matthias, yet he didn't want to frighten the younger man off. Instead, he settled settling his hands on Matthias's hips. His body thrilled at being so close.

Their bodies brushed together, and Matthias stiffened, but he didn't pull away. The feel of Kent's hands was comforting and more than a little distracting. But that was nothing when Kent shifted with the movement of the water and his lower body pressed against Matthias's hip under the water.

Recognizing it in a swamping bit of horror, Matthias flinched and jerked back without thinking, flailing in the water.

Kent fumbled in the water as he tried to move back and give Matthias some room. He cursed himself for allowing himself to feel so much so soon. Just then, the front bell rang, and he climbed out of the water and wrapped his towel around his waist. Leaving Matthias to think, he hurried to get the food.

After a minute, the fright passed, and Matthias was taking even breaths, trying to calm down. He'd reacted from memory, not taking into account that he knew who he was with. Although he was certainly surprised that Kent was aroused around him, it wasn't like he was pinning him against the side of the pool and forcing.... Matthias shook his head clear of the old memories. With a sigh, he climbed out of the pool and dried off. Glancing to the door, he figured Kent was still paying, so he pulled his shirt over his head and wrung it out.

Kent stepped back through the open doorway in time to see Matthias give a final wring to his shirt. He watched with hungry eyes, forcing himself to stay still and silent until the shirt was back on Matthias's lean frame. "Food's here."

Matthias pulled his shirt down with a tug and turned to look at Kent, nodding. "I'll grab us some drinks," he said quietly, skirting past him and jogging inside.

Kent sighed and set the food on the table, realizing the ease they'd had around each other was now gone.

Stopping in his room at the small fridge Kent had found for him in the basement, Matthias pulled out a couple of off-

brand colas and stood, looking at himself in the mirror. He wondered what Kent saw in him. He was thin with a pointy nose, narrow lips, and lanky hair that would never lay flat. He glanced at his hands—long, bony fingers were great for playing piano, but not much to look at when touching someone else. And he knew that under his shirt he showed off more bone structure than any bulk of muscle. He was about as opposite of Kent as somebody could get, looking at bodies. With a sigh he stood there for a moment, thinking.

When Matthias had been gone too long, Kent rose from the table he'd settled at and stepped into the house. "Matthias?" His voice was low, not wanting to frighten the other man more than he already had.

Lost in thought, Matthias looked over his shoulder, seeing Kent. "Ah ... sorry. Was just thinking," he said quietly.

Kent watched Matthias with curious eyes, but didn't ask any questions. Instead, he turned back toward the sliding door to the back deck. "Food's getting cold."

"Okay," Matthias answered, turning to follow Kent back out to the picnic table, carrying the two slightly cold cans. He slid his legs over the bench and sat, offering Kent one of them. He inadvertently made eye contact and immediately blushed.

Kent sighed inwardly at the uncomfortable reaction Matthias had around him. Filling his plate with the spicy-smelling food, he began to pick at it.

Matthias stole quick glances at him as they both ate slowly, and he could tell the normally hearty eater wasn't happy about something. He finally screwed up his courage,

not wanting to lose the first and only friend he had in America. "Kent, did I do something wrong?"

Kent lifted his gaze, blinking at the question. "Did you do something wrong? No! No. Nothing at all." He traced swirls in the condensation on the side of his soda can. "I shouldn't have pushed you. I'm just mad at myself."

Confused, Matthias's brow wrinkled. "I wouldn't say you pushed. I know what that's like," he added wryly before staring at his food again. "It was...." His throat closed. What should he say? Really nice? Okay? Fantastic? Frightening? "Warm," he finally finished awkwardly.

"Warm?" Kent repeated, finally meeting Matthias's gaze fully. A smile curled the corner of his lips. "Warm. I think I can handle that."

Eyes unsure, Matthias searched Kent's face. "Warm," he repeated softly. "Warm and wonderful," he said, barely audible, ducking his head again.

Kent slid his hand across the table, cool fingertips touching the back of Matthias's hand. Sliding his fingers carefully, he wrapped his hand around Matthias's, just sitting quietly.

Trembling slightly, Matthias's eyes darted to their hands, and as Kent made no other move, he relaxed again, starting to eat a bit more. Kent held Matthias's hand as they finished their meal.

Finally Matthias needed to move; they'd sat like that, silent but comfortable, for several long minutes after they'd eaten. Pulling away, he gathered the trash and bundled it up. "Need a bathroom break," he said quietly, disappearing back into the building.

Kent nodded, moving to a lounge chair where he could dry off in the setting sun. He pulled the other lounge chair close enough that he could reach out and touch Matthias if he allowed it. It was like trying to make nice with an abused cat. That made him wince, reminding him that someone out there was responsible for abusing this gorgeous, gentle man.

Walking back out, Matthias saw the chairs slid together and actually smiled. Kent meant it. He meant what he'd said and what he did, or else he was playing a cruel game of monumental proportions. Pushing that thought away, Matthias sat beside him, crossing his legs at the ankles, setting his hand on the arm of the chair right next to Kent's hand, hoping he might feel his touch again and be comforted.

Kent's hand immediately covered Matthias's, no qualms. He sighed, satisfied with the moment. Curling his fingers through Kent's, Matthias spent the minutes just getting used to the sensation. When he finally dared, he slowly turned his head to look at him. "What does this mean?" he asked quietly.

Kent studied their linked fingers before looking up to meet Matthias's eyes. "It doesn't have to mean anything if that's what you want. I told you I like you. I think you're gorgeous. I don't wanna rush you into anything you're not ready for."

Matthias slowly nodded. "It's not something I think I will ever be ready for," he said. "But you make me feel. Feel...." He shrugged. "I don't understand what it is you see in me."

Kent rose from the chair, moving to sit on the edge of Matthias's chair, pretending not to notice how he slid away slightly. "Want me to tell you what I see?" Without waiting for

an answer, he reached out to touch Matthias's hair gently. "Silk." His fingertips grazed Matthias's lashes. "Sparkles." He ran a finger the length of Matthias's nose. "Strength." His thumb brushed a swollen lip. "Beauty." He lowered his hands back to his lap. "I could go on for a while, but I'm not all that poetic."

Staring in disbelief, Matthias slowly raised a hand to touch his lip where Kent's thumb had passed. It felt warm, and his blood buzzed. "Okay," he whispered, not minding if Kent kept talking. Although he really thought he might like another kiss.

Kent took Matthias's hands in his, tracing long fingers. "These hands make the most beautiful music I've ever heard." Looking up to Matthias's face, he mused, "I wonder what they'd feel like."

Matthias blinked, and his mouth opened slightly in surprise. "You want me to touch you?" he asked, obviously surprised.

Kent hurried to reassure the younger man. "If you want to."

Amazement shone in Matthias's eyes. "No one's ever asked me before," he said.

Kent shrugged. "The world is full of dumbasses."

Again blinking in surprise, Matthias just studied Kent's face, and he knew then that he really did want to touch him ... and maybe even be touched as well. "Can ... may I?" he asked quietly, a nervous anticipation settling in his belly. Kent moved closer in answer to the shy question.

Reaching out, Matthias lightly touched Kent's cheek with his fingertips, just stroking gently, turning his fingers to do



the same with his knuckles, watching in wonder. Kent mirrored the action, letting Matthias's movements dictate his own, though they were much less graceful. Matthias moved his hand to lightly brush his fingertips over Kent's lips, then the straight line of his nose, then his closed eyelids. He was enchanted, driven by Kent's acquiescence. Kent's fingers followed the path Matthias's made, his pressure light. He pressed a kiss to the pads of the fingers that explored his lips, tongue darting out to touch one.

With a soft inhalation, Matthias paused, pressing his fingers against Kent's lips again, hoping to feel that naughty wet warmth that thrilled him to his toes. He could feel his cock thickening, something he'd always had to make happen for himself. He'd never been aroused by touching someone else before.

Kent opened his mouth, taking a long finger inside and suckling it. He opened his eyes, watching heat turn Matthias's face an enticing pink color. Entranced, Matthias watched his finger slide into Kent's mouth and settle on his tongue. He could feel the warm, wet muscle sliding against his calloused skin, and his breathing picked up. He wanted to feel that in other places, as well. Hand shaking, he pulled his finger free, trailing damp along Kent's cheek as he leaned closer, focusing on those flushed lips.

Kent met Matthias halfway, hand sliding around behind Matthias's neck as their open lips met. He sighed softly as their lips touched, and his tongue darted out to taste the younger man's lips immediately.

Matthias's shuddering exhale was caught on Kent's lips as he received his desired kiss. The touch of Kent's tongue sent sparks of warmth skittering along Matthias's nerves, and he slid his hand around Kent's neck as well. The warmth flooding him was addictive.

Kent's other hand settled on Matthias's rib cage, thumb brushing back and forth over a prominent bone. He moved closer still, the warmth of Matthias's body permeating his skin despite the damp T-shirt between them.

A long, pleased groan escaped Matthias before he could stop it. "Kent," he whispered between kisses, his lips swollen. All he could think of was him.

"Yeah?" Kent breathed, lips trailing along Matthias's jaw to purse wetly around a chilled earlobe.

Matthias sighed, shivering as he felt Kent's lips move on his skin. "I've ... it's never felt like this."

Kent sighed. "I want you to enjoy it."

"I ... I want...." Matthias stumbled over words; he simply didn't know how to express himself like this. "I want to be safe," he finally whispered.

Framing Matthias's face in his hands, Kent whispered, "I know you have no reason to believe me, but I'd never hurt you."

"I want to believe you. You make me feel safe," Matthias murmured, turning his head to press his lips against Kent's palm.

"We can take this as slowly as you want." Kent's breathing became labored at the touch of hot lips against his palm.

Nodding slowly, Matthias drew a breath, his nerves causing him to quiver all over. "Will you kiss me again?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Kent used his grip on Matthias's nape to tilt his head back, pressing his lips wetly to Matthias's chin and sucking gently before sliding higher and kissing those luscious lips again. His tongue coaxed its way into Matthias's mouth, sliding hotly against his tongue, swirling and luring it into his own mouth.

Matthias thought he might drown in the pleasure swamping him. He'd never been kissed before, not really, certainly not with any feeling, and this ... this had so much feeling he thought he might explode from it. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and he nervously rubbed his tongue against Kent's, hoping Kent would like it.

Kent groaned, the sound muffled between their mouths, as Matthias began to participate actively in the kiss. He moved sluggishly, as if he wasn't even sure of his own actions as he slid beside Matthias in the lounge chair, taking him into his arms. His body aligned with Matthias's, touching from knee to shoulders, and again at hands and lips.

Shuddering, Matthias held himself in place, overriding his immediate urge to flee and instead focusing on the warmth of Kent's arms around him. He relaxed slightly and laid his head against Kent's shoulder. Kent pressed soft, reassuring kisses along Matthias's forehead, pushing the still-damp hair from his face. Comforted, Matthias relaxed even more, the peace of having strong, safe arms around him taking precedence over any desire.

\* \* \* \*

Kent didn't fail to take note of Matthias's absence from the din and clutter of moving day. It wasn't unexpected. What was unexpected—and not at all welcome—was the pang he felt in his heart at not having Matthias near to laugh at jokes and smile shyly at him from under spiky dark lashes. He found himself knocking on Matthias's door.

Matthias hid in his room, studying some new music as he tried to ignore the sounds of moving and new voices filling the lobby. It felt like an invasion, especially after he'd lain in Kent's arms for almost an hour the night before, just being close, enjoying the quiet time together. He sighed, knowing that was likely all over now. Kent's friends would be back, and he'd have school and job responsibilities, and no time for a nervy student, even if he was one he'd kissed.

Not expecting the knock, he jumped. He stood and went to the door, opening it carefully to check who stood outside. His eyes widened. "Hi, Kent," Matthias said quietly, but he smiled.

"Hey." Kent tipped his head. "Can I come in?"

Glancing over Kent's shoulder and seeing no one behind him, Matthias nodded and stepped back, gesturing for him to enter. He wondered if Kent had come to tell him what to do to close up each night, as they had agreed.

As soon as the door was shut behind him, Kent stepped close, reached up to pull Matthias's face gently down, and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Missed you today."

The stiffness in Matthias's shoulders drained away as Kent's arms closed around him, and he smiled against Kent's

lips. "I've been here," he murmured, placing his hands carefully on Kent's hips.

"I wish I coulda been in here with you," Kent returned, sighing against Matthias's mouth. "I hate moving day. It's a mess." He slid his hands down Matthias's arms, lacing their fingers together and tightening Matthias's arms around his body.

Matthias daringly rubbed his lips against Kent's again, heartened when he didn't pull away. "It's been noisy," he agreed. "I don't figure on any playing time tonight." Matthias closed his fingers over Kent's, wondering how long it would be before he would leave.

Kent grunted and shrugged. "There's still hours before we can lock up. Can I stay in here with you?"

Blinking in surprise, Matthias pulled back a little. "In here? You want to stay here? With me?" He was gobsmacked. His room was totally bare but for his made-up bed, toiletries on the dresser, and stack of music on the desk. It was a far cry from Kent's comfortable and decorated rooms.

"Yeah. I want to stay here with you," Kent murmured bashfully as he ran a hand over his shaved head. He glanced around the room. "I can sit on the floor. I don't want to disturb you working."

Matthias blinked, looking at Kent's pink cheeks. "Sure, if you want. I mean, it's kinda boring...." He trailed off. "You can sit on the bed. I was working on music," he explained weakly.

Kent shook his head, moving to sit on the floor instead. "Go on. I don't want to mess with your work. I love your music, and I don't want to keep you from making it."

Frowning, Matthias walked backward to his chair. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable," he said, sitting down slowly, watching Kent the whole time.

Kent sighed heavily, climbed to his feet, and grasped the doorknob. "I'm making *you* uncomfortable. I'm sorry."

"No! Don't go...." Matthias trailed off, standing up before he realized it. Surprised by his heart pounding, Matthias curled his arms around Kent from behind. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just have a hard time understanding you really want to be here. With me."

"I don't get why you would want to be with me either," Kent answered. "I don't even know if you really *do* want to be with me or if I'm forcing you into it."

Matthias's brows furrowed again. "I wouldn't let you in here if I didn't want you here," he said firmly. He stepped back to let Kent turn around. "Believe me. I learned my lesson before." He reached up to lightly touch Kent's cheek. "I wouldn't let you near me if I didn't want you near," he said, voice quieter.

"Do you? Want me?" Kent asked awkwardly. "I mean, do you want me 'near'?" His hand covered Matthias's, pressing it close to his cheek.

Matthias's voice was a bare whisper, but his eyes were dark and serious. "Yes," he answered. Then his voice gained strength. "If that's what you want."

Kent took the hand that cupped his cheek, pulling it down to press it against his T-shirt just over his heart. "I want it. I want you." He grasped Matthias's neck with the other hand, pulling him down until their lips meshed wetly.

Feeling heat flush through him at Kent's declaration, Matthias kissed him back, actually feeling it, wanting it, and he gasped into the other man's mouth as he felt himself rouse. Although Matthias felt a niggle of worry for what type of "wanting" Kent had in mind, for now he just accepted and soaked in the attention.

Kent backed off, letting Matthias control the kiss. Stepping backward, he moved them until he was pressed against the wall with Matthias flush against him.

Instinctively chasing Kent's lips, Matthias stepped forward, trying to keep in contact, and pressed his body against Kent's before he realized that he'd pushed him back to the door.

Kent's hands slid down to grasp at Matthias's hips, pulling him closer to the cradle of his hips. His breathing became erratic, rushed and fevered as he let Matthias use his mouth.

Matthias forgot they were in a bare dorm room, forgot he was taking over, forgot everything except the lips under his and how Kent's body was so warm under his. Hard but not harsh, not threatening. Welcoming and enticing. With a soft gasp, Matthias pushed his hips closer against Kent's, a groan caught in his throat.

A soft sigh escaped Kent's lips as Matthias's interest in him was made evident. His eyes closed as his head fell back, banging lightly against the door. "Yeah."

Trembling, Matthias's lips ghosted over Kent's. "Yes?" he repeated, his voice thick. "Yes what?"

At the soft question, Kent rolled his hips, oblivious to Matthias's reaction.

Matthias shuddered, feeling heat bloom in his own groin as he felt Kent's cock press against him. While on one hand he was scared witless, he also recognized that Kent was letting him control the situation. With a soft moan, Matthias pushed his hips forward again, mashing their groins together and letting a short cry loose as their cocks rubbed hard.

Kent spread his legs and braced himself against the wall, begging Matthias silently for more. One part of him was thrilled that he was reacting like this, but another part—the sensible part of him—dreaded the regret he'd see on Matthias's face once he realized what he was doing.

Wallowing in the heat, Matthias opened his eyes to see Kent pressed against the door, legs spread and body braced, and the image yanked him out of the arousal. He looked all too much like he was being forced. Swallowing hard, he stepped back, pulling his body away, eyes fastened on Kent's face and lips, hoping he hadn't abused the privilege he'd been given.

Kent closed his eyes, reaching out to grab Matthias and pull him close, not wanting him to regret what had happened. "That was hot," he whispered. "You can do that to me any time."

Surprised, Matthias's breath caught, and he relaxed slightly. His voice was shaky when he found words. "Um. All right, if you like."



Threading his fingers into the longer strands of hair near Matthias's nape, Kent met his gaze honestly. "Are you comfortable with this?" he asked, needing to know that he wasn't forcing Matthias into things.

"Comfortable?" Matthias asked at a near squeak. "I wouldn't say that, no. But just being close to you makes me uncomfortable. In an oddly good way," he finished quietly, peering down through dark lashes, obviously torn between learned shyness and stirring desire.

Rubbing his thumb idly beneath Matthias's ear, the shorter man smiled. "You're honest. I like that." After several seconds, he added, "I like you." As Matthias stepped back, Kent walked over to the desk where Matthias had been working. Tracing his fingers over the staves on the page, he touched a note mark. "What are you working on?"

Dazedly watching Kent move away, Matthias felt bereft and was tempted—for a moment—to pout. Amazed at himself, he leaned back against the door, crossing his arms. "Marking up some new music I need to memorize."

Kent turned his head, watching Matthias lean against the door. He really had no idea how sexy he was. He reached up slowly, unbuttoning a couple more buttons on Matthias's shirt, ghosting his hand over his skin as he did. "How does it sound?"

A tiny furrow appeared between Matthias's eyebrows as he frowned. "Sound?" he asked faintly. He was paying close attention to Kent's fingers close to his skin.

"Hum it for me," Kent requested, looking back down at the sheet music. "I wanna hear it."

Blinking, Matthias immediately started humming softly. It was a slow, meandering, melancholy tune with measured pauses, right in his register. Matthias kept his eyes on Kent's hands, seeing the short fingers nearly brushing the skin of his chest. Kent's eyes closed as he let Matthias's voice wash over him. The tune was sad, making him sigh deeply. Tilting his head, Matthias kept humming as he slowly reached to ever so lightly let his fingers brush along Kent's cheekbone. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears in counterpoint to the melody he hummed.

Leaning into the touch, Kent moved slowly, his arms sliding around Matthias's waist. The need for Matthias's touch overwhelmed him. It was almost painful. Careful, almost afraid, Matthias slid his fingers along Kent's cheek to his jaw and underneath, tracing the line of the bone, feeling the warmth of the skin under his fingertips. He was practically holding his breath the whole time.

Kent tilted his head back, letting Matthias explore him at his own pace. His own hands remained still. Gaining an ounce of courage, Matthias turned his hand to pull the backs of his fingers over Kent's opposite cheek before sliding his hand over the smooth, bald skull. Swallowing hard, Matthias leaned closer, almost holding his breath, to press his lips to Kent's brow, along the bone over his left eye. The sheer intimacy of it thrilled him.

A soft sigh escaped Kent's lips, ghosting against Matthias's collarbone. The feel of Matthias's explorations sent sparks of desire through his system, causing him to inch closer.

Heart still pounding and chest tight, Matthias slid his lips over Kent's brow and down to the corner of his eye, then to his cheekbone, the smooth skin warm against his lips, the pauses between his humming growing longer. Letting his eyes fall nearly closed, he followed the line of Kent's jaw to his neck and up to his ear, in a spark of bravery flicking his tongue over the lobe briefly.

A jolt of arousal shot to Kent's groin as Matthias's tongue touched him. "Please," he begged, not too proud.

Surprised by Kent's response, Matthias delicately extended his tongue again and traced from his earlobe up, coasting along the shell of his ear to the top and then repeating the movement, slowly.

Kent shivered, leaning further into the touch. His right hand began to wander, pushing beneath Matthias's T-shirt to ghost along the indentation of his spine. Letting out a heated, pent-up breath against Kent's ear, Matthias pushed back into the hand, eager to feel its touch. He slid his hand from Kent's head down his neck to his shoulder, fingers splaying over the collar of his shirt. "Is this okay?" he whispered nervously.

Kent bit his lip to keep from begging Matthias for even more. Instead, he settled on a jerky nod, his fingers teasing just beneath the waistband of Matthias's shorts.

Feeling Kent's fingers at his waist, Matthias's shoulders stiffened, and he pulled back against the door without thinking, still touching Kent, but shying away slightly. He stopped himself, blinking, apology flaring in his eyes.

Matthias pulling away was like a cold shower to Kent's system, reminding him where he was and what he was doing.

"Sorry." He apologized, removing his hands and hanging his head.

Catching Kent's hand, Matthias shook his head and reached to raise the other man's chin. "No, it's me," Matthias whispered, one shoulder shrugging. "Just I'm not used to...." He drew a breath, embarrassed and skittish at the same time. "Not used to—"

"I pushed you," Kent muttered. "I promised I wouldn't push you to do anything you didn't want to do."

Matthias frowned, tilting his head. "Kent, I do know how to say 'no'," he pointed out reasonably. "I'm just a little edgy, is all. No one's ever touched me like this, so gently. With meaning. No one's wanted to," he tried to explain.

"It's all I wanna do," Kent breathed, lifting his eyes to meet Matthias's gaze. "All I think about is touching you and making you want me."

The younger man's jaw worked for a few seconds, as if he couldn't get the words out. Then he bit his bottom lip. "I do want you," he said so quietly it was almost inaudible.

Kent nodded slowly. "You have to know I want you."

Matthias nodded slowly. "Kent. I want to tell you—" His mouth snapped shut, and he dropped his eyes, cheeks flushing dark in embarrassment, hair tumbling over his shoulders to hide his face. It was obviously an unconscious but practiced motion.

Lifting a hand, Kent pushed the red hair back, unwilling to let Matthias hide from him this time. "Tell me what?"

"Why," Matthias started, looking up at Kent, his eyes aching and lost. "Why I react like this," he murmured, crossing his arms over himself.

Recognizing the defensive gesture, Kent was unsure whether to stop touching Matthias's body altogether or to maintain contact. In compromise, he stepped back a step, letting his hand settle on Matthias's crossed forearms. "I'll listen, if you wanna tell me."

Looking at Kent's hand, Matthias nodded, biting his lower lip again. "Last year, when I came here, I moved into Potter Hall. I liked it there. Until one night, late in first term." He sighed, shifting his feet. "A group of guys came into the showers. They were drunk and high, I guess, and angry because their girls went off to another party. They took it out on me."

Kent's face whitened. "What did they do to you?"

A shoulder edged up as Matthias kept his eyes focused on the floor. "About everything they could think of," he murmured, face blank, a contrast to the rigid bearing of his body.

"Did they...." Kent gulped at the implications of Matthias's words, but he needed to know for sure if the other man had been taken against his will.

Swallowing hard, Matthias looked up at him, pain obvious in his eyes. "What? Show me a good time?" he asked bitterly. "Sure. Every single one of them." It was obvious he'd talked to someone about this before.

Kent felt pain roil in his gut. "That's not how it should be."

"No?" Matthias asked quietly, his voice flat. "I didn't think so either. But their stories didn't match up with mine, so...."

"He shrugged. "That was the first time."

Kent felt himself go pale. "It happened more than once?" He began to understand the full impact of what had happened to Matthias. He regretted being so open with his affection, now knowing that it held an entirely different significance.

Matthias sighed, moving his arms and trailing his fingers over Kent's hand. "They figured out I was alone here, no family, very few friends, and the administration dismissed the complaint as unfounded. Boys found themselves a good diversion, they did: safe, quiet, no mess, no fuss." The words were hollow, as if he were repeating someone else's terms. He fell quiet for a long moment. "I tried to transfer schools during the summer, but I have a full scholarship here," he murmured.

Hearing of the school's failure to protect Matthias, Kent stretched to his full height as fire came into his eyes. "They won't bother you again. You're in my house now."

Raising his eyes slowly, the emotions in them softened and Matthias nodded. "I feel safe with you," he said. "I just have these memories," he added with a wince.

"And you probably always will," Kent said sadly. "I just hope someday you can find peace."

"Now do you understand?" Matthias asked softly. "Why it's difficult for me? It's not that I don't want you. In fact, you're the first person I've ever really wanted at all," Matthias said, eyes pleading.

Nodding, Kent once again wrapped his arms around Matthias, an element of protectiveness in the gesture. Matthias relaxed in his arms, letting the gentle caring sweep over him.

\* \* \* \*

After Matthias's confession, Kent found himself watching him at odd times, noticing the way he interacted—if he interacted—with the other residents. For what seemed like the hundredth time that week, he felt thankful for the respectfulness of the other students in his house. So far they had left Matthias alone, just passing greetings to the quiet man as he worked at the piano late in the evenings. In fact, Kent had noticed more than once that several of the students gathered at the top of the steps to study and listen to the music Matthias played.

So it wasn't a surprise that Kent was sitting nearby when Darrin walked in one evening, stopping to talk to Matthias as he worked on a complicated piece. The easygoing blond flirted shyly with Matthias, and Kent would have been jealous, but Matthias seemed oblivious to the glances Darrin sent his way.

Glancing up sideways as Darrin stopped by, Matthias kept playing and offered him a half-smile. He was British, practically a countryman, and he'd taken a couple classes with him last semester. He was a drama major, so some of their curriculum overlapped. Darrin was kind to him, and Matthias felt reasonably comfortable around him. Nodding to a comment from him, Matthias paused to mark his music.

Kent's ears perked up when he heard Darrin mention taking Matthias out to dinner that evening. He frowned slightly, not really knowing if Matthias would say yes or no. He wouldn't fault Darrin for wanting to date if he found someone trustworthy, but he'd never thought of what that might mean for him.

"You don't have to do that, Darrin. It's just a couple pages of notes," Matthias demurred, shaking his head. He almost smiled as Darrin tried again to get him to go to dinner, although his insistence made Matthias a little edgy. "No, thanks. Like I said, I have to work on this music, and I'm not at all hungry," he explained.

Sitting on the bottom step, Kent could see the disappointment that washed over Darrin's features as he said good night and went upstairs to his room. Rising from his perch, Kent approached the piano. "He likes you," he stated in a quiet voice during a lull in the music.

Looking up in surprise, Matthias stopped mid-note. "What?" he asked, confused.

"Darrin." Kent clarified. "He likes you." Watching Matthias reposition his long fingers back on the keys, he added, "He's really nice. One of the nicest people I know."

"Likes me," Matthias repeated, starting on the bars of music again. "You mean as in *likes* me?" he asked, eyes darting to take in Kent's face.

"Yeah." Kent nodded, leaning on the piano. "Looks like a lot."

Matthias continued to play for a little while, stopping to practice a set of measures over and over. "I like him," he



finally answered. "You're right; he's very nice." His fingers kept moving on the keys as his eyes slowly edged up to look at Kent. "But I don't *like* him."

Kent's eyebrows raised just a touch, the question flowing from his lips without thought. "Why not?"

The music stopped abruptly as Matthias blinked up at Kent. "Um?" Kent waited patiently for an answer. Matthias lowered his eyes to stare at the piano keys, trying to put his feelings into words. "He's nice. But that's it. I don't want more from him," he said.

Nodding, Kent murmured, "I hope you find someone you want more from."

Swallowing as his mouth went dry, Matthias slowly looked up to Kent, and he had to pull his hands from the keyboard and hide them in his lap as they showed a visible tremor.

Turning, Kent leaned back on the piano, stretching his neck as it cracked audibly. "I'd thought...." His voice trailed off. He had given Matthias space since the night he'd explained why he reacted the way he did.

Matthias knew very well what he had thought. He'd struggled with it every night for a week as Kent kept his distance. While he appreciated the space, he missed his friend. And he missed his touch. Taking a chance, he reached out and slid a finger along Kent's hand.

Kent's fist opened at the touch, giving more surface to rub over. He turned his head, hiding the reaction the touch ignited in him.

When he didn't pull away, Matthias slid his other fingers closer, passing his palm over Kent's knuckles gently, rubbing lightly. "I like you, you know," he said quietly.

Turning lazily toward Matthias, Kent turned his hand, letting their palms slide together. "But do you *like* me like me?" he teased, a smile curling his lips.

Matthias pressed his palm against Kent's, sliding it until their fingers threaded together. Then with his heart beating so loud he was sure it was audible, he whispered, "Yes."

Kent squeezed Matthias's hand gently. "I *like* you too," he said. He rounded the piano, sat beside Matthias on the bench, and nudged him over just the smallest bit because he wanted to be pressed against him.

A tiny smile formed on Matthias's lips, and he moved over a bit on the bench, his arm over Kent's, and he started playing again, this time the slow melody he'd been humming a week ago, rather than the classical piece he'd practiced earlier.

The piece was special to Kent, evoking memories of the experimental touching he and Matthias had done. Closing his eyes, he let himself drift back to that night, mind wandering to imagine what might've happened. He snapped his eyes open when Matthias stopped, realizing with a red face that he was very aroused and that Matthias was watching him with dark eyes.

The change in Kent's breathing caught Matthias's attention, and he stopped at the coda, turning his chin to look at Kent's flushed face and head with something akin to awe. He wanted to ... touch. "Want to ... watch some TV?" he

asked, his voice a shade darker than usual, hoping Kent would understand.

Reading Matthias's face correctly, he hoped, Kent stood and took Matthias's hand, leading him toward his rooms. He opened the door and pulled Matthias inside, locking it behind them. Standing still, he waited for Matthias to react.

Totally forgetting the music he left on the piano, Matthias looked across the room to where one small lamp in the corner burned, throwing shadows along the wall. The light carved across Kent's face as Matthias turned his back on the lamp to face him, and bravely he lifted a hand to brush his knuckles along Kent's cheekbone as he stepped closer. Kent's head tilted back at the gentle caress and his lips parted, waiting for Matthias to kiss him. A needy moan escaped him, and his chest rose and fell in double time at the anticipation.

That sound gave Matthias the reassurance he needed, and he lowered his lips to Kent's, smoothing across them once before settling firmly into the kiss. He slid his hands to settle at Kent's waist, their bodies grazing as he lightly lapped at Kent's lower lip.

Breath stuttering across Matthias's lips, Kent was unsure whether to touch or to just let Matthias have his way with him. Instead, he wrapped his fingers around Matthias's hands, holding them firmly to his body, not wanting Matthias to stop touching him. With Kent pinned between him and the door, Matthias felt safer than he thought, so it was easy to give himself over to the kiss, learning the odd softness of Kent's mouth. His fingers moved slowly over Kent's upper body, guided by Kent's own hands. It was intoxicating.

Feeling brave and needing more, Kent moved one of Matthias's hands to his groin, pressing it against his cock. Even though he was directing the action, it caused such need in him that he whimpered, wishing Matthias was doing it of his own accord.

Matthias gasped against Kent's mouth, hardly able to believe he was causing such a reaction. Hand shaking, he pressed a little harder against the firm ridge he could feel under the denim, ready to pull back at the slightest objection.

Kent groaned and moved his hand away to see if Matthias would hold the caress.

"That sounds encouraging," Matthias murmured hoarsely against Kent's lips as he pressed his palm against Kent's groin and slid it back and forth.

Kent nodded frantically, hips bucking slightly as Matthias touched him. "I want to ... God, Matthias, your hand."

Matthias pulled back slightly, but pushed his hand more firmly against Kent's jeans, stroking. "Like this?" he asked, breathless, eyes wide and amazed.

"Wanna feel you," Kent grunted, pushing at his own jeans.

Matthias paused, meeting Kent's eyes. "You want my hand on you?" he asked, wanting clarification before he went any further.

"Yes," Kent groaned, praying that it wasn't too much to ask. "Your hand, my hand, somebody's hand, please!"

Fighting the urge to laugh, Matthias nodded and stepped back slightly so Kent could get to the fly on his jeans. Fumbling, Kent finally got the zipper open and pushed the

pants down over his hips. Pressing his hands flat against the door, he closed his eyes and waited.

Tilting his head, Matthias slowly reached forward, first letting his fingers brush against Kent's hip, then his lower belly. "Don't you want to watch?" he asked, knowing that not being able to see was one of his own frights.

"I trust you," Kent blurted, biting his lip as the anticipation kept building.

"Let me see your eyes," Matthias requested, his hand straying lower to Kent's groin, brushing lightly through the curls there. He had to be sure; not to mention he wanted to see the heat he knew would be there. "Please? Your deep, dark eyes?"

At Matthias's pleading tone and thrilling words, Kent opened his eyes, meeting Matthias's green ones. The teasing touches Matthias skirted around his cock aroused him further, making him thrum with need.

Smiling, Matthias nodded and slid his hand lower, fingers curling around the hot, thick flesh as he stepped closer once again, their chests brushing as he started to pump the shaft up and down. His lips landed lightly on Kent's forehead, then down to the corner of his lips.

Kent turned his face up, blindly seeking Matthias's lips as the tentative hands grew more confident on his flesh. "Yeah," he sighed, hips starting to buck again, making his cock bump against Matthias's jeans.

Terribly aroused by the trust Kent had in him, by the sounds he made and the feel of the hot skin under his hands, Matthias shifted to one side so he could press closer, his groin

against Kent's hip as he continued to stroke and palm the dampening cock. His lips strayed to Kent's ear and neck, and he reveled in being able to enjoy this so much.

When Matthias moved, Kent's hand settled on his hip, bracing as he began to tremble in the build of his orgasm. "Oh God," he breathed.

"Perfect," Matthias echoed in his ear, shocked by how much he was feeling, and he tightened his hand on Kent's erection, rubbing his thumb over the head, feeling the pre-come make the skin slippery. With a soft moan of his own, he pressed his hips against Kent, creating a little friction.

Kent's hand slid from Matthias's hip, down his thigh, hooking it, holding it. "Close," he moaned. He reached with his other hand, fingers brushing Matthias's groin before settling low on his hip.

Biting his lower lip against the cries he wanted to make, Matthias pushed harder against Kent's hip as he sped his hand. It moved easily now, slick with Kent's fluids, and he couldn't hold back a quiet groan as he realized he was about to make himself come in his jeans.

Searching for Matthias's mouth, Kent muffled his cries as he came, warm liquid spilling out of him as Matthias worked his flesh. The heat coating his hand, the friction against his cock, and the knowledge that he had brought Kent to this pleasure shot Matthias over the edge. Unthinkingly trying to block his own sounds of pleasure, he bit down solidly on Kent's lower lip, his panting mewl escaping.

Kent cried out at the mixture of pain and pleasure, the mix forcing a second smaller orgasm from him. His eyes widened

as he realized what had happened. He'd never had that with anyone before.

Shocked by his own orgasm and startled by Kent's cry, Matthias pulled back suddenly, still shaking, panting, eyes wide. "Kent?" he asked fearfully, hands raised in appeal.

Dazed with the intensity of his orgasm, Kent didn't even think. He simply acted, pulling Matthias across the room into his bedroom and to the bed.

Still shaking, Matthias let Kent pull him alongside on the bed although it took him a bit to relax, still somewhat keyed up, but Kent's arms around him were not confining, just comforting, and he soon settled, pillowing his head on Kent's shoulder and letting his eyes close, savoring the last of the thrills that shook him.

"Thank you for that," Kent whispered when he finally regained his senses. His fingers traced idly over the veins in Matthias's arms, his voice an easy sigh as he added, "And thank you for *liking* me."

Not trusting himself to answer, Matthias turned his face up enough to place a sleepy kiss on Kent's chin. "I should go," he whispered. "I'm about to fall asleep."

"Don't go," Kent whined, voice fading drowsily. "We're safe here, and you're here with me, and nobody can bother us." He realized he was rambling pathetically, but damned if he could stop it.

Matthias thought about it for some long moments. He was actually comfortable, although he wanted to get out of his damp jeans and boxers. And Kent was warm and made him

feel safe. Finally he sighed. "Got some shorts I can wear?" he asked.

Kent climbed over Matthias and out of the bed, heading to his dresser. He pulled out a pair of boxers as well as a soft, worn T-shirt just in case the other man wanted both. He handed Matthias the stuff, motioning to the bathroom. "I'll get the bed ready." As soon as Matthias went into the other room, he zipped his jeans long enough to secure the front door of the house and get Matthias's sheet music. When he came back into the room, he locked his door once more and laid the sheet music reverently on the desk before changing into fresh boxers himself.

Matthias walked into the bathroom, shutting the door firmly, and stood looking at himself in the mirror. He—Matthias McGaughey—the man who had sworn off sex forever as a disgusting, miserable act, had an incredible orgasm tonight. Without really trying. And now, he wanted more. Sighing, he cleaned up, used the bathroom, changed into Kent's shorts and shirt, and washed his face, eyes drooping despite the faint sense of discomfort he felt. Not at being here, not at what had happened, oddly enough. But because he thought he might want more. Carefully, he opened the door and peered out after shutting off the light.

Kent looked up from where he sat on the edge of the bed. Even now, he half-expected Matthias to leave. Sliding under the covers, he motioned for Matthias to join him, fluffing the pillow beside him. Seeing that Kent was scooting to the inside against the wall, Matthias walked over to the bed, flipped out the last lamp and sat down, tucking his feet under the covers



and settling on the very edge of the bed. It was a wide single, barely enough room for them both, especially considering Kent's frame. Matthias wasn't at all sure what to do, but he missed the feeling of being held.

Kent reached across, tangling his hand in the shirt Matthias wore. He tugged the other man back to him, tucking his head beneath Matthias's chin. Resting his arm around the taller man's waist, he sighed happily.

Shifting a bit, Matthias moved until he was comfortable, and they were wrapped around one another. He liked it. Very much. "Good night," he whispered, dropping a kiss on the top of Kent's head.

Eyes already closed, Kent pressed a kiss to Matthias's neck. "G'night."

\* \* \* \*

Kent stretched beneath the sheets of his bed, idly wondering why the slight chill of the early September morning didn't make him as cold as it usually did. Rolling over, he bumped into a warm surface. His eyes opened wide in the dark just before dawn, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Matthias resting beside him. He gulped loudly as he realized he'd probably let things go too far and that Matthias would more than likely flee as soon as he woke up. Closing his eyes, Kent stilled his body, figuring that if he could let Matthias sleep longer, then the other man would still be in his bed when the sun came up.

Slightly jarred from sleep, Matthias shifted, face pinching slightly as he felt confined. He pushed the blanket away,

feeling too warm, and then his hand collided with warm flesh, and he froze. Opening one sleepy eye, Matthias peered through the predawn darkness to see Kent and then he relaxed slightly, his memories returning.

Kent reacted unthinkingly, grasping the hand that bumped him and pulling it to rest against his chest as he tucked the blanket back around himself. Turning his head, he brushed a soft kiss over the ball of Matthias's shoulder, his lips clinging for a second before he pulled away.

His other eye opening to watch in sleepy curiosity, Matthias's emotions were unthinkingly laid bare without his usual masks during the light of day. He was amazed by Kent, that the man who looked so big and mean was so gentle, that he wanted him for more than just a tussle. A pang of hurt and regret crossed his face when he wished he could have met Kent before last year.

Eyes staying closed, a small smile quirked across Kent's lips. "You should go back to sleep. You don't have class until after lunch on Tuesdays." He flushed in the darkness, realizing he'd let slip exactly how much he'd learned about Matthias in his interest in the other man.

Turning his head so he could look at Kent better, Matthias's brows pulled together. "You know my class schedule?" he asked, not so much scared or offended as honestly surprised Kent would care to find that information.

"I notice when you're gone," Kent admitted, rolling back over to face the wall and wishing Matthias would hold him. "Does that count?"

Matthias shifted to his side, now facing the same direction as Kent, looking at his shoulders and the curl of his ear. Reaching out tentatively, he touched Kent's arm and rubbed lightly. "Yes," he said, almost a whisper.

Kent shivered beneath Matthias's gentle touch, and before he could stop himself, he slid back in the bed, molding his body against Matthias's.

Surprised, Matthias held up his arm as Kent scooted back against him, and he carefully let it settle over the other man's waist. His other arm curled under his pillow, Matthias felt fairly comfortable, and he shifted under the covers until their bodies touched from chest to knee, just trying to get comfortable. "Is this okay?" he whispered.

Kent nodded and then whispered, "Yes," when he realized the room was still fairly dark and Matthias might not be able to read his physical response. In truth, it was more than okay that Matthias held him like this. It was what Kent wanted.

After long moments of stillness, Matthias's arm tightened about Kent's waist and leaned his forehead against Kent's neck, his lips settling upon his shoulder.

Matthias's warm breath on his skin made Kent shiver again, and he pushed closer to Matthias. "Nice. Being held like this by you."

"Yeah?" Matthias breathed, feeling calm and comfortable.

Kent shivered again, his entire body shaking as Matthias's breath washed over him again. "Yeah." His body began to wake up, but he hid his arousal from Matthias, not wanting him to feel pressured.

Matthias frowned slightly as he felt a shudder wrack Kent. "Are you cold?" he asked, concerned, reaching to pull up the second blanket. "You're shivering."

Reaching out, Kent pinned Matthias's hand to his flank, not wanting the other man to feel around and see exactly how he was reacting. "Not cold. Just enjoying you close to me."

Brow still furrowed, Matthias pulled Kent closer, trying to keep him warm. "By shivering?" he asked, trying to understand.

"If I were a romantic guy who read a lot, I'd describe it as shuddering," Kent murmured. "There's a difference. Shivering is being cold. Shuddering is being too hot. For a different reason."

The frown eased as Matthias's eyes widened. At the same time he felt his cock twitch against Kent's rear and moaned quietly, his warm breath coasting over the Kent's neck.

Another, fresh quake rippled through Kent's body at the feel of Matthias's warm flesh all along the length of his back. When he was prodded, he arched back, his own arousal pushing at his shorts.

"Sorry," Matthias whispered, scooting back so he wasn't hitching his hips into Kent's arse.

"Don't," Kent protested. "You'll fall off of the bed. I can move back over."

"Move over where?" Matthias asked incredulously, unable to believe they'd slept this long in the oversized twin bed. He slid his hips back, because he was indeed on the edge, and rammed into Kent's rear without meaning to.

"Oh God!" Kent gulped, forgetting about moving for a moment or two. "There's room over by the wall."

Surprised by Kent's squawk and the shot of heat through his own groin, Matthias jerked back, flailed, and lost his balance, his hips succumbing to gravity, and he fell over the side and thumped to the floor.

The momentum of Matthias's body, along with the blanket wrapped around him, pulled Kent over the edge too, and he reached out, trying to break his fall before he hurt Matthias. Luckily he landed next to him, groaning loudly.

Aching from where he landed, Matthias lay back on the floor, waiting for the pain to pass. "Ouch," he finally said into the darkness.

"Yeah," Kent returned, rubbing at his hip as he tried to push up from the floor. "Ah, fuck, that hurt."

Struck by how funny the whole situation was, Matthias laughed silently, biting his lip, only his jerking breaths giving him away.

Kent smacked at Matthias's shoulder. "Better your ass than mine. I was hoping...." He bit off the end of his sentence, realizing how close he came to admitting that he wanted Matthias to fuck him and that would be enough pain, though he'd sure as hell enjoy it.

Matthias snickered a little louder. "Hoping what?" he asked between chuckles, sitting up and wincing.

Rising gingerly to sit on the bed, Kent flushed. He couldn't bring himself to broach the subject, given what he knew about Matthias's past. "I guess it's not better it's your ass. That piano bench is hard."

Shrugging even though Kent couldn't see it in the dark, Matthias sighed. "You get used to it. I used to run to counteract all that sitting still, until.... Now I just exercise in my room," he finished quietly.

Kent climbed up off the floor and settled himself back beneath the covers, scooting back against the wall as he invited Matthias back into bed. The change in topic definitely limited their early morning activities. "We can still swim laps. Pool's never used, and it's ... damn it. It's closed in the winter. Fuck."

Matthias chuckled. "I guess I'll pass," he said, mentally referring to both activities, though he didn't vocalize it. He sat on the edge of the bed, feeling Kent's hand on his arm. "Sure you don't want me to head back to my room?" he asked tentatively. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Kent reassured Matthias. "I just don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you too far too fast, and I'm afraid—" He slapped his hand over his mouth and groaned.

Face stilling, Matthias looked directly at Kent even though he couldn't see much in the darkness. "Afraid of what?" he asked clearly.

"Afraid I want more than you want to give," Kent answered, head pressed into the pillow as he waited for Matthias's answer.

Pretty sure what Kent was talking about, Matthias swallowed nervously. "Like what?" he asked, voice only wavering a little. He kept his arm still, not pulling away, hoping Kent wouldn't either.

"I want you with me," Kent murmured. "Really. However and whenever you want."

Sliding his hand to cover Kent's, Matthias lightly rubbed the fingers he'd felt move on him. "I didn't think you'd want me," he whispered. "Not after—"

Kent's fingers tightened further. "How could I not want you? I don't care about that, what's in your past. I hate it that it happened to you, and I'd love to strangle the fucks who did it to you, but it doesn't make me not want you."

Voice shaking almost as much as his nerves, Matthias voiced his greatest fear. "Kent, I don't think I can ... let you.... I'm sorry." He shifted his weight, making to get up.

Kent's heart broke at the softly spoken words, and he removed his hand from Matthias's arm, not wanting to hold him somewhere that distressed him. "It's okay."

"Last night was ... incredible," Matthias choked out. "But I can't—" His voice cut off and then came back stronger than usual. "I don't think I'll ever want someone fucking me again." After those words fell in silence, he shifted and stood to leave, figuring Kent wouldn't be interested anymore.

"It doesn't only happen one way," Kent said desperately, hoping the words would call Matthias back. "I like it both ways." He sank into the corner of the bed, pulling the covers up as his face flushed.

Matthias stopped in place, a couple steps from the bed, turning in the darkness to look at Kent in surprise. "You mean you'd let me...?"

The top of Kent's shiny head bobbed beneath the edge of the cover as he nodded. "If you wanted to."

"If I wanted to. Kent, that doesn't mean that *you* want me to," Matthias said in frustration, not able to see Kent in the dark.

"I don't offer myself to just anyone, Matthias. If you hadn't noticed, I'm not exactly the kind of guy you would think is gay, much less is willing to be fucked." Kent's voice hardened a little, his heart closing in at the perceived rejection. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if I hadn't wanted it."

Shaking with equal parts nerves and desire, Matthias made a pathetic, whimpering sound before he shifted. "Can I turn on a light? I need to see your face."

Kent's thick arm extended from beneath the cover and slapped at the dome light above his headboard. Moving the blanket down, he asked, "Is that better?"

The glowing dome sent bare illumination pouring over Kent, and Matthias could see his face. Exhaling in relief as Kent didn't look at all angry like he sounded, Matthias chanced sitting on the edge of the bed again. "Kent, I'm sorry. I've never done this before. And with my hang-ups...." He shook his head before looking up with huge eyes, honesty gleaming in them. "I just can't comprehend what it is about me that you like so much. I'm damaged."

"You are not damaged!" Kent snapped. "The people who *hurt* you are *damaged*. They're fucked in the brain. *You* were *abused*. Perhaps you cracked a little, but you're *stronger* for it. You're practically fucking perfect to me, Matthias."

Matthias looked at Kent, his eyes clearly showing how much he wanted to believe. "Thank you," he whispered.



Kent pushed the covers away and moved onto his back. He took Matthias's hand and tugged, pulling the other man to rest flush against him. "You were too far away," he muttered.

Shifting so he laid close, Matthias pillowed his head on Kent's shoulder. "Will you hold me?" he asked quietly.

Kent's arms wrapped around Matthias's frame, and he turned onto his side, his position in the bed allowing him to press his lips to Matthias's forehead. Matthias settled close, letting Kent's warmth and closeness lull him back to sleep, the nerves draining away. Kent smiled, glad that Matthias at least felt comforted by him.

Shifting in Kent's arms as he drifted to sleep, Matthias murmured to himself, thinking he was already dreaming. "Love you, Kent...."

At the sound of the whispered words, Kent's eyes opened wide, and his heart lurched. Oh God. Calming his breathing, he smiled and pulled Matthias closer.

\* \* \* \*

Matthias's hands smoothed over the keys as he played, the music floating, ethereal and complex, haunting. He just let it flow, his eyes mostly shut as he let muscle memory take over, letting the music express the emotions he couldn't put into words. He had left Kent's bed at dawn and sought the piano, all his feelings so jumbled that he couldn't tell one from the other. And so now, in the early morning, he played.

Nudged from sleep by the gentle melody of a beautiful song, Kent rose from his bed and padded out the door of his room to see Matthias tickling the ivories. The song made him

feel peaceful and confident, allowing him to approach Matthias. He sat down on the bench edge again, far enough away that Matthias could continue to play.

He was distantly aware of Kent joining him, but Matthias stayed immersed in the music, letting it soothe him until it finally wound to its end, softly. He said still with his fingers on the keys for a long moment before dropping his hands into his lap. Kent remained silent, afraid to break the mood.

Taking a deep breath, Matthias turned to look at Kent. "Morning," he murmured. He was still sleep-mussed, dressed in Kent's shorts and T-shirt, barefoot, hair askew.

A smile quirked Kent's lips. "Morning. Lazy day now. You?" It was still entirely too early to speak in complete sentences.

Matthias tilted his head and shrugged, looking back at the piano. "No plans," he murmured. "Music, I guess." He looked back at Kent. "Lunch?"

"Near the pool? If it's warm enough?" Kent asked, a hopeful glint coming into his eyes.

Chuckling, Matthias nodded, smiling slightly. "Sure," he murmured, and then his eyes narrowed. "You want your shirt back," he said more as a statement than a question.

"Only if you want to come to my room and take it off," Kent suggested with a smile. "I promise I'll keep my hands to myself."

Matthias's lips twitched. "What about the pool?"

"Pool? What pool?" Kent's eyes dropped to stare at the juncture where white T-shirt contrasted with tanned neck.

"All right," Matthias agreed. "But you have to feed me," he bargained, actually joking.

Reaching out to touch Matthias's arm, Kent suggested, "Maybe we could go out. If that's okay with you."

Blinking in confusion as he stood, Matthias looked down at Kent. "Go out?" How did Kent get from Matthias taking off his T-shirt in Kent's room to going out?

"Later," Kent backpedaled, realizing he was asking too much. "It's okay. I can order pizza. Sorry." He scooted back, tumbling off of the end of the bench.

Matthias lurched out to catch Kent before he hit the floor. He realized what Kent was talking about. "You mean go out for lunch?" he asked mildly.

"We don't have to. Forget I asked. I'm sorry," Kent rambled.

"Kent," Matthias tried to interrupt. "Kent!" He finally grabbed his arm. "It's okay."

Bumbling, Kent turned back to his room. "The shirt is yours if you want it." He was completely off-balance now.

Matthias trailed after Kent into his rooms and shut the door behind them. "Um, well," he said, looking down at the shirt that was way too big on him, but he didn't mind. Confused, he skipped back to what seemed like the safest topic. "Food?"

"Sure. Just let me know when you're ready to eat, and I'll phone in an order." Kent sat at his desk, rearranging things meaninglessly. In truth, he didn't know how to react to Matthias now. Last night, the other man had said ... he'd whispered.... And now he reacted so strongly to the suggestion of going out.

Really confused now, Matthias sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. He said mournfully, "Can we go back to bed and start over? Because I'm confused."

Kent laid down the papers he was working on, burying his head in his hands. "I'm sorry. I know I'm sending mixed signals." He turned and looked at Matthias, a small smile settling on his lips. "Do we have to fall out of bed again if we start over?"

Rubbing his hip, Matthias made a face. "Please, no," he answered.

Rising, Kent pulled his clothes off until only boxers remained. Climbing into the bed, he cuddled under the unmade covers as he waited for Matthias to join him. "Well?"

Amused that Kent took him literally, Matthias turned and slid his feet under the covers, settling down on his back as he had been when he woke up. With a sigh, he closed his eyes.

Edging closer, Kent molded himself to Matthias's side. "Is this what you wanted?"

Lips curling, Matthias shushed him as he tried not to laugh. Kent fell silent as he rested his head on Matthias's shoulder. One arm wrapped around Matthias's waist, holding them close together.

Sighing happily, Matthias waited for a minute, counting silently, and then he yawned and started to stretch. When his arms met skin, he turned his chin and opened sleepy but sparkling eyes. "Morning," he murmured.

"Morning," Kent replied, snuggling closer. As he stretched, he arched against Matthias's body.

Matthias's eye softened as he watched. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Mmm, no. Not just yet," Kent murmured, running his hands over the soft cotton covering muscled flesh. "At least not for food."

Blinking, Matthias swallowed as heat flashed through him. He knew exactly what Kent was talking about. "What are you hungry for?"

A bed-tousled and sleepy-looking Matthias was a very sexy sight indeed, causing Kent's breath to catch. Running a finger along the waistband of the ridden-up T-shirt, Kent husked, "You."

Heart pounding, Matthias licked his bottom lip, nervous, but also aroused enough to want it. "I trust you," he whispered.

Kent held Matthias's gaze for a long time, as if examining the inner workings of his mind. Slowly, he pushed the T-shirt up, fingers teasing at tanned flesh. "No. *I* trust *you*."

Reassured, Matthias relaxed under Kent's hand, understanding what Kent meant. His pulse raced with equal parts excitement and nerves, and he moaned softly on an exhale.

"We don't have to do it today," Kent sighed, body heating beneath Matthias's regard. "I'd be satisfied just to touch you."

"Then touch," Matthias whispered. "As long as I can see you doing it."

Kent nodded, eyelids falling to half-mast as he urged the shirt off Matthias's upper body. His hands slid unimpeded

over Matthias's skin, stopping to tease and pinch at a distended nipple. "And taste?"

Matthias's brow slid up. "Taste? Ah ... sure," he said uncertainly. "What do you want to taste?"

"Your skin," Kent breathed, dipping his head to furl his tongue around the nipple he'd previously tortured. He moaned at the taste of Matthias's skin, a mixture of soap and musk that made his head spin.

Inhaling shakily, Matthias's jaw dropped in a surprised "Oh," his hand curling in the sheet. "Oh," he breathed again, eyes wide and slightly glazed.

Kent nuzzled against the soft cotton boxers that hid a hardening cock. Nosing at the flap, he inhaled deeply before pushing it aside.

The whimper escaped Matthias's lips as he watched Kent with wide eyes. Matthias could feel his cock twitch as it hardened, and he felt excitement burning in the pit of his belly. "Wha—what are you going to do?" he asked shakily, although he made no move to stop Kent.

"Taste you?" Kent's answer was more of a question as he met Matthias's eyes, wanting to make sure what he was doing was okay.

Matthias's jaw dropped and closed and reopened like a fish, until he was able to make a strangled sound of affirmation. He nodded a couple times, eyes still wide and disbelieving.

Kent's hands spread the fabric of the boxers, his tongue extending to press inside the opening, leaving a wet trail over hot flesh. He gripped Matthias's hips, urging him up as he

tugged the boxers down. Undulating under Kent's hands, Matthias flushed darker as he was exposed to Kent's eyes, but the press and slide of Kent's tongue distracted him. A soft moan was Matthias's reply.

When Matthias was exposed to his eyes and mouth, Kent smiled before lowering himself and pressing his lips to the head of Matthias's cock in a sweet kiss. Lapping at the musky flavor of Matthias's arousal, Kent hummed contentedly, opening his mouth to take in more.

Matthias laid his head back against the pillow, the sensations ripping through him causing him to shudder. Kent's mouth was absolute sin, and Matthias had never felt anything like it. It was so much more intense than when he brought himself off with his own hand. Groaning, Matthias unconsciously shifted to lift his hips toward that hot mouth.

Taking Matthias into his mouth, Kent moved his mouth up and down the stiff shaft, his saliva slicking as he moved up and down, humming in pleasure. Matthias found he couldn't keep quiet. Kent's touch and kiss and tongue were driving him insane. He murmured thoughtlessly, how good it felt, how he'd never felt it before, the other man's name escaping on a soft gasp.

Kent's hands touched Matthias tentatively, rolling the sac beneath his cock as he suckled at the shaft in his mouth. He wanted to taste Matthias, the essence of the other man.

The soft touches were thrilling to Matthias, who'd only ever been handled roughly, and he jerked his hips upward as the heat threatened to overwhelm him. "Kent ... Kent, I'm going to ... oh Christ," Matthias hissed as he lost control, a loud cry

rasping from his throat as his gut contracted and he came into Kent's mouth.

Kent swallowed each wave of Matthias's come, stroking the man softly through his climax. When Matthias rested bonelessly against the bed, he pressed one last kiss to the soft flesh of Matthias's groin before sitting up and pulling the boxers back into place, smiling sweetly at Matthias.

Matthias's unfocused eyes rolled and he settled them on Kent, before reaching to take Kent's hand. "I had no idea. Thank you," he murmured, lifting the other man's fingers to his lips.

Kent petted Matthias's lips gently, the smile remaining on his face. "My pleasure," he whispered, eyes large and moist at the emotions that came with the experience.

"Do you ... can I?" Matthias swallowed, reaching out to Kent. "Can I do something for you?" He wasn't sure what he'd do, but he was willing to try. He loved Kent something awful even if he was too scared to admit it, and he really wanted Kent to feel as good as he felt right now. Matthias held out his arms, inviting Kent to curl up next to him. Kent lay down on the bed, cuddling into Matthias's welcoming arms.

"I like being with you."

A soft smile curved Matthias's lips. "I'm glad," he whispered, pulling Kent close and letting his hands rove tentatively, just learning the feel of him so close.

Kent remained as still as possible considering what the feel of the soft, gentle hands on his body was doing to him. He purred in enjoyment, closing his eyes as he rolled onto his back, opening his body to Matthias's curiosity.



"You like that?" Matthias asked, voice a soft rumble as he slid his long fingers over heated skin and muscle, tracing bones and curves.

"Yes." Kent groaned, arching his body into the touch. "I love it when you touch me."

Matthias chuckled. "I could just make like you're a piano," he murmured, thrumming his fingers along Kent's ribs.

Kent grinned, loving the feel of the hands on him. "I like that."

"Yeah?" Matthias continued to "play," stretching out his fingers and tapping them along Kent's body as if he were the keyboard. Getting brave, Matthias's hands strayed lower, to the curls of Kent's groin and inner thigh. "What about that?"

Kent moaned, lifting his hips slightly into the touch.

"Is this where it feels best?" Matthias asked, stroking and tapping his fingertips along the swollen cock between Kent's legs.

Half-laughing, Kent clarified, "I mean, you're doing it for me, as long as it's a solo performance."

Curling his fingers around Kent's arousal, Matthias started to pull at it slowly. "I don't want to perform this for anyone but you," he said softly, dropping his head to press a kiss against Kent's jaw.

"Good," Kent moaned, half-turning into Matthias's touch. "I'm a little possessive," he sighed heavily, breath gusting through his parted lips. He shuddered on the bed, hand gripping at Matthias's hip. "Aw, hell. I'm a lot possessive."

"Possessive?" Matthias asked softly, voice full of wonder. "Possessive of me?"

"Hell yeah," Kent sighed. "I don't want anyone but me to ever touch you again."

Tightening his hand over Kent's cock as he added a little speed to his stroke, Matthias slid his lips to Kent's brow. "I feel the same way," he whispered.

"Good," Kent murmured again, moving closer to Matthias's body. "You can touch me whenever you want."

Shuddering and hitching his own hip against Kent's, Matthias pushed his softened cock against his lover's hip as he pumped Kent more firmly, enjoying the aftershocks. "Will you come like this?" he asked, voice nearly a purr with the satisfaction that his touch could do this to Kent.

"So close already," Kent warned, hips hitching into the warm hand that worked him. "Please, let me come."

In awe, Matthias smiled softly. "Let you come? I'm trying to make you come, hon," he said, the endearment crossing his lips easily. He leaned to kiss Kent deeply, their tongues stroking as he continued pushing Kent to the edge. "Come on," Matthias murmured against Kent's swollen lips. "Let me feel you come for me."

Kent's body folded against Matthias as he came hard, filling the other man's fist. He moaned into the kiss, tongue stroking and sucking as he rutted against Matthias in the aftershocks of his orgasm.

Matthias shivered as he pulled Kent close, kissing him back just as hard, the thrill of feeling Kent's hot come spilling over his hand just cementing his feelings. Holding on to Matthias as if he were his sole hope of surviving, Kent wrapped his

arms around the other man's neck, mouthing the words he couldn't say against a sweat-soaked neck.

\* \* \* \*

Walking across campus late the next week, Matthias was preoccupied. He kept his satchel over one shoulder as he walked with long strides, nose turned over a sheaf of music in his hand, a pencil in the other as he made notes. He would still have been in the studio, except Kent had told him to be home for dinner by seven, knowing Matthias would work all hours without eating unless he intervened. Matthias smiled slightly for a moment, thinking about his lover, before he skipped down the steps to pass through the arboretum.

He kept walking, using the arboretum as a shortcut to get across campus. He was oblivious to what was around him, getting lost again in the music. He did pause at the bottom of the steps to puzzle over a particular passage.

At the pause in Matthias's steps, strong arms wrapped around him from behind, pushing him forward to the bricks. "Well, well—liked us enough to give us another shot, huh?"

Caught by surprise, the music hit the concrete, papers scattering as Matthias gasped in pain as he hit the wall, nearly face first. He turned his chin, fear curling inside him as he saw the three football players behind him. "Let me go, Bosworth," Matthias said, trying to keep his voice even.

"I don't think I feel like letting you go," Bosworth gritted through his teeth as his face twisted in anger. "I think that I might like another go at you, boy."

Bile rose in Matthias's throat as the other two laughed darkly, one even pulling off his jacket. "Don't do this," he said, pushing against Bosworth's much bigger hands. He knew there was no way he could fight the football player off, but he could run if he could get loose.

"Why not?" The huge man huffed humorlessly. "Justin and Brad would like a little more of your attention too. For being such a dweeb, you're good for a fuck, at least." He hooked a hand in the back of Matthias's jeans, dragging him roughly along the wall.

Getting panicked, Matthias's hands scrabbled on the bricks, trying to hold himself at the bottom of the steps. He couldn't let this happen. Not again. But he couldn't keep Bosworth from dragging him deeper into the lonely arboretum. Clearing his throat, he did the one thing he'd never done when attacked before. Matthias drew in a deep breath and screamed for help as he felt two more sets of hands touch him.

A passing security guard heard the yell and sounds of struggle deep in the arboretum. He snuck down the stairs, surprising the group of football players as he shined a bright flashlight at them, catching them in the act of attacking another student. "Boz?" he asked, recognizing the football player and standing dumbfounded as the three boys rushed off, leaving a shaking, gasping man at the base of the stairs.

Falling to his knees in fright and relief, Matthias wrapped his arms around himself, leaning against the concrete and breathing harshly, trying to stave off the tears at the near

miss. When the guard approached, Matthias cringed. "Please, call Kent Thomas in Hensley Building," he said hoarsely.

The security guard radioed the request into the main hub and was told that the man was on his way. He knelt near the student. "You're all right," he whispered, hoping to calm the man. "They can't hurt you. We should file a report about this."

Matthias laughed harshly, but didn't say anything, instead curling tighter into himself, pressing against the concrete. His eyes, nearly wild, focused on the sheet paper blowing across the arboretum.

"If we report this, they'll be arrested; even expelled. They can't bother you if they're not here," the guard promised in a hopeful tone. He saw the young man's eyes focus on the blowing paper sheets. The guard stepped away and started picking up the loose papers. He had retrieved the sheets of what appeared to be music just as another man ran down the steps, hurrying to the victim at once.

Kent stepped down into the dim lighting of the area, afraid of what he'd find. Matthias was huddled on the pavement, and he went straight to him, almost afraid of what had happened here. "Matthias? It's me, Kent. Talk to me, baby."

Matthias uncurled and clung to Kent right away, burying his face in his shoulder, beginning to shake all over as he let the terror wash through him. It was all Matthias could do to keep from hyperventilating at that point.

Kent's arms tightened around Matthias's shaking frame, and he lowered himself to the floor, rocking the other man

slowly in his arms. "Ssshhh. It's okay. I'm here. I'll protect you."

"Kent," Matthias got out in a choked voice, throat clogged with tears. "It was them. They were going to ... again."

Glancing at the security guard, who was keeping his distance, Kent lowered his voice to a murmur. "If they ever touch you again, I swear ... I don't know what I'll do to them, but it'll be painful and life-altering." He caressed Matthias's back, still rocking him. "I'll see that they are nowhere near you as long as we're together."

Clutching at his lover, Matthias cried like he'd never let himself before, all the pain and fear draining out, only stopping when the EMTs arrived to check him over. But he wouldn't let Kent go, and he refused to go to the hospital, insisting they hadn't done anything—this time—although they'd certainly intended to.

"Can I take him home?" Kent asked the paramedics, stroking the fingers that clutched his. As he was given permission, Kent looked down into Matthias's eyes. "Maybe we should think of getting our own place. I hate the thought of taking you back to the house." Getting an idea, he pulled his mobile out and called Darrin, arranging for him to have the house locked up. He'd bring Matthias in the back way to avoid any unnecessary attention.

"But I like the house," Matthias said faintly, hating the whiny sound coming from him. But he was so shaky he could barely stand, even with Kent's help. "Oh, my music," he gasped, turning to look on the ground for the sheets that were scattered.

The security guard stepped forward just then, handing the young musician his notes. "I'll have a report for you to sign in a few days, Mr. McGaughey. Right now I want you to go home and get some rest." Having written his report from the story the young man had given the medics, he tucked his clipboard under his arm.

"Thank you," Matthias murmured, accepting the sheets of paper. "I'm very glad you were nearby," he said, voice nearly breaking again.

"I am too," the guard answered, hating to see anyone be so traumatized by such an act. Turning toward Kent, he added, "Take care of him. Don't let him be out alone until you hear from the department. We don't want to risk another attack." Kent nodded, holding Matthias tight to him.

"Let's get out of here," Matthias said quietly, leaning heavily on Kent.

Kent nodded, squeezing the other man close to him for just a second before leading him out into the relative light of the street. They walked briskly, not wanting to encounter more people than was necessary. Finally, they stepped through the back door of the house and locked it behind them. Kent took Matthias straight to his room, double locking the door as they entered.

Matthias sat on the bed as Kent locked the door to his room. He just stared at the floor, in shock, he supposed, unable to really focus on anything except what had almost happened.

Leaning against the door, Kent watched Matthias with worried eyes. He had been so quiet on the way back to the

house, making Kent wonder exactly how the attack would affect him. He moved closer slowly, pulling a chair from Matthias's desk and sitting close by.

It was some time before Matthias looked up at Kent, the fear and vulnerability clear in his eyes. "Why, Kent?" he whispered, although he knew Kent wouldn't have an answer.

Kent shrugged. "Because they're assholes?" He dared reach across and touch Matthias's hand. "They're not half the man you are."

At the gentle touch, Matthias's face crumpled. "I didn't want that. I didn't want them. But they wouldn't stop," he said hoarsely, wrapping his arms around his middle.

Heart breaking at the apparent anguish of the other man, a tear slipped from Kent's eyes as his fingers slid away from Matthias's hand. "I know you didn't want it. Nobody wants that."

Matthias struggled with his emotions, almost coughing through the choked sobs, before he looked up, eyes glittering with tears. "Do ... do you still...?" He dropped his head, unable to even ask. He felt like utter dirt after the football players had attacked him again.

Hearing the unspoken question in Matthias's words, Kent moved immediately to the bed, pulling Matthias's shaking frame into his arms. "I love you more than ever. You stood up to those guys."

With a broken cry, Matthias burrowed into Kent's arms, burying his face against his lover's shoulder. "I didn't want them! I don't! I love *you*!" he rasped between the despairing cries wrenching from him.



Kent held the sobbing man until the sounds began to quiet. He then laid both of them back on the bed, holding Matthias protectively against his body. "Oh baby."

Curling up close, Matthias held Kent tight, unwilling to let go. Finally, he drew calmer breaths. "I lost my music," he murmured distantly.

"The guard saved it," Kent reassured Matthias, running his hand soothingly over his back. "It's on your desk. I think it's all there."

Overwrought, Matthias actually laughed, a little on edge. Then it subsided and he burrowed close. "Just hold me?" he asked quietly.

"Always," Kent promised, pulling Matthias just a bit tighter. "Always," he repeated, his voice thick with emotion.

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Matthias continued to play, his hands floating over the keys in a romantic tune, a smile pulling at his lips. He finished with a flourish, looking up at his sole listener with twinkling eyes, the smile finally breaking free.

Kent mimicked a golf-clap, watching Matthias with fond eyes. "Bravo! Excellent performance, maestro!" He smiled, stepping closer to the piano that had sat in the front room since Matthias had moved into the house more than a year ago.

Matthias stood from the bench and sketched a half-bow. "My first published composition. I'm glad you like it."

"It's one of the best works I've ever heard." Stepping closer, Kent slid an arm around Matthias's waist. "What inspired you?"

Leaning down, Matthias kissed Kent lightly. "My love for you," he said quietly.

Kent's jaw dropped. "I inspired that?"

"Yeah," Matthias confirmed, closing his arms around the man who had become the center of his life.

In the months since the attack, he had valued Kent's support so much. With Kent's help, he had seen his attackers prosecuted and expelled; he went through counseling and learned to carry on with his life. As far as he was concerned, Matthias would keep Kent in that life.

"So, I thought you might want some warning before you saw the dedication of it printed in my recital program tonight," Matthias murmured.

Kent's eyes widened and a smile spread across his face. "Have I told you lately that I'm so proud of you? And that I love you?"

He was and he did. Matthias had done exceptionally well in the past few months, overcoming his shyness and fear to become confident and poised in most situations, even outside musical performance. It was a rare situation that brought out the quiet and frightened Matthias these days.

When the more demure personality made itself known, Kent made sure to reassure and love him, the same as he loved the "new" Matthias.

Matthias grinned and hugged Kent close. "Now that is music to my ears," he said.

Dissonance  
*by Sonja Spencer*

Sonja Spencer has always enjoyed writing as an escape from her professional life. She spends what spare time she has with her family and friends; and she loves long walks on the beach, jumping in puddles and cuddling puppies. She aspires to be an entertaining writer and a gourmet chef.

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