



Seeing the Forest
By Alexa Snow

Jared McCormick opened the door between his office and the waiting room and nodded at Mia Butler as she stepped past him. She'd been making excellent progress -- one of the hardest working students he'd had in years -- and he was developing a genuine fondness for her, something that rarely happened for him with his clients. "See you next week."

"Thanks," Mia said.

"I'll just be a few minutes," Jared added to Kyle Griffin, who was sitting nervously on the edge

of one of the waiting room chairs.

Kyle clasped his hands around his knees. "Okay."

In the few minutes he had between appointments, Jared took notes, just little things he hadn't had time to jot down during a session. Mia's skill, which had emerged about two years ago as she'd been finishing up her senior year at university, was empathy, and she hoped to work as a psychologist when she'd completed her schooling. Jared knew she was going to be a top-notch traditional therapist -- she had a strong sense of self and the ability to detach from the emotions she was feeling from others, something that empaths often lacked.

Finishing his notes, Jared opened the door to the waiting room again and made a come-here gesture with his fingers at Kyle, who still looked nervous. "Come on in."

Kyle hesitated over which chair to sit in -- Jared had several in the office, preferring to give people a choice -- and finally settled on the blue padded one. Then Kyle stood up again, smoothed his trousers, and sat back down.

"Okay?" Jared asked.

"Uh-huh." This was Kyle's second visit. It wasn't uncommon for clients to be nervous when they first started seeing Jared, especially when their skills had just emerged and they were overwhelmed, but Kyle had to be the most jittery client Jared had ever seen. It made him want to put the younger man at ease that much more.

"So," Jared said. "Tell me how you've been since the last time we saw each other."

"Freaked out," Kyle said, hands twitching in his lap. He leaned forward in his seat, scratched his ankle, then leaned back again. "Um. Am I not supposed to admit that?"

"You can tell me anything you want," Jared reassured him. "There aren't any right or wrong answers. Remember, your skill is one of the most difficult ones to adjust to. This is a normal, if not entirely pleasant, period of adjustment you're working through. Cut yourself some slack."

"It's just -- I feel crazy." Kyle abandoned the chair in favor of pacing the length of the office, which had been designed with that use in mind. "I can't stop any of it from getting in. It's constant, like -- like people are throwing stuff at me."

"You can relax here," Jared pointed out. The office building had a protective overlay that prevented outside influences from penetrating, and his office itself had an extra layer just in case. It was necessary; people who were learning to handle their psychic powers needed a safe space where they could let down their guards. "You aren't getting anything now, are you?"

Kyle stopped his pacing and took a deep breath. "No. Not even from you."

"I've been shielded, remember?" Jared didn't have any psychic skills of his own, which meant his

training to become a Skills Therapist had taken an extra three years and a hell of a lot of dedication, but a master psychic had put a permanent shield on him the afternoon he'd graduated. There was no chance of any of his students picking up even the faintest wisp of a thought from him.

"I think I'm going crazy." Kyle dropped down into his chair and gave Jared a desperate look.

Jared shook his head and set down his pad and pen. "You're *not* going crazy," he said firmly. "You're experiencing a typical early reaction to the emergence of your skill. That's all. I know it seems overwhelming, but it's going to get easier, I promise."

Kyle dropped his head down into his hands and began to rock in place, forward and back. "It's not, it's not. I'm losing it. I can't -- I can't deal with this, it's too much."

"Tell me about it," Jared said, concerned, but not letting the emotion into his voice. "What is it that you're seeing?"

"It's not just *seeing*," Kyle said. "It's -- it's everything. It's like a movie, only with smells, and... and *tastes*." He lifted his face and looked at Jared again, eyes wild. "I'm living it."

"Living *what*?" Jared asked. He was getting more concerned by the second. It was true that Kyle's skills had rated particularly strong, but this was fast starting to get beyond Jared's experience.

"Murder!" Kyle leapt to his feet again and resumed pacing. "People dying. Someone -- someone killing people."

Okay, this wasn't totally unprecedented, although Jared hadn't personally dealt with it before. "Tell me more."

"Why would you want to know?" Kyle's voice was rising in both pitch and volume. "Why would anyone? Don't you get it? I can *hear* them screaming! I can see the blood, and *smell* it, and... do you know what that much blood smells like? God, I can feel it on my skin..." He rubbed his palms frantically against his trousers, then tugged at his shirt collar, pulling it away from his throat. "I can't -- I can't breathe..." He was hyperventilating, gasping like he'd been running for miles.

Quickly, Jared got up and went to him. "Easy; you're okay. Sit down." He pushed Kyle into the nearest chair and crouched down in front of him. "You can breathe. Slow and easy, come on."

"I'm really freaking out," Kyle whispered, grabbing onto Jared's hands. "Help me. You have to help me, please..."

"I will," Jared said. "I am. But first, you need to calm down. You're safe here."

"But I can't stay here forever," Kyle said. He was shaking. "I'm not safe out there. I'm not safe

anywhere."

"You're safe here with me," Jared repeated soothingly.

Kyle tightened his grip on Jared's hands. "With you." He leaned forward and grabbed onto the back of Jared's neck and kissed him hard. The kiss came as a total surprise to Jared, who'd never misread someone so completely before or after.

The shock was so great that it took him longer than it should have to disengage his mouth from Kyle's. When he did, he lost his balance and ended up on his ass on the floor.

"Oh God, are you okay?" Kyle asked, reaching for him. "I'm sorry, I --"

"We can't do this," Jared said. He got up and straightened his clothes. "It's not that I don't find you attractive --" Shit, he probably shouldn't have said that, but it was true. Kyle was slender and blond with great hands and wide shoulders, and under other circumstances Jared would have said 'yes.' "We have a professional relationship. That's all."

Kyle nodded, though he looked disappointed. "Okay. Right, of course. I'm sorry. I was just -- and you were -- but yeah. I get it. Does this -- are you going to have me reassigned? To another therapist?" He looked worried at the very idea.

Jared considered the idea for a few seconds, then dismissed it. "I don't think I have to do that," he said. "As long as it doesn't happen again. And..."

"I won't mention it to anyone, I swear," Kyle said. "It never happened."

"Okay. Good." Jared went back to his seat and checked his desk clock. "So, we've got forty minutes. Tell me what you've been experiencing, and we'll figure out a way to help you deal with it."

"Thanks," Kyle said, pausing at the door and looking back at him. "I mean it."

"You're welcome," Jared said. "See you on Friday."

In the quiet office -- Kyle had been his last appointment of the day -- Jared finished taking some notes. When he wasn't freaking out, Kyle had a good sense of humor, and when Jared had gotten him talking about what he did for fun, he'd become downright engaging. It gave Jared hope that Kyle wasn't going to be one of those rare psychics that just couldn't handle the emergence of his skills.

Just as he finished up, his cell phone rang. He answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey," Shaun said. "You want to go get a drink? You're done, right?"

"Yeah, I'm done," Jared said. "But maybe another night? I'm wiped."

"Sure. You okay?" Shaun sounded worried, which didn't come as a surprise, considering he was one of the most talented psychics in the country.

Shaun had joined AST, the Association for Skills Therapists, around the same time Jared had, and they'd been paired up in those early days, learning techniques together from opposite sides of the equation. They'd even dated a few times before Jared had decided training and romance weren't compatible in his life and put a stop to it. Now they were friends -- the best of friends -- and spent most of their free time together, since neither of them had been in a relationship for several years.

Jared put down the pen he'd been doodling with and sighed. "I'm fine. Just tired. How was your day?"

"Okay. You had that new guy again, right? How's he?"

"Overwhelmed," Jared said. He got up and started getting ready to leave. "You remember what it was like."

"I sure do," Shaun agreed. "But there's more to it than that. I can tell."

"Are you *sure* you can't read me?" Jared asked, smiling.

Shaun laughed. "You know I can't -- not anymore." During their training, he'd been able to, of course, but not since graduation. "Your shield works against everyone, not just students."

"Right, right. I guess you just know me too well."

"No such thing," Shaun said. "You're the best person I've ever met. Knowing you is a relief, compared to the rest of the world."

Jared shut off the desk lamp and shrugged into his coat, then sat back down because it was obvious their conversation wasn't over. Sitting in the dark was kind of comforting, somehow. "Yeah, well, I feel the same way about you."

"So tell me what's going on."

"I can't." Jared didn't have to be psychic to know that Shaun didn't really expect him to break confidentiality. "He's just... it's more intense, somehow. Something's different. I'll figure out what it is sooner or later."

"I'm sure you will," Shaun told him.

Jared's apartment was dark when he got home; Shasta, his cat, was waiting for him. "Hey," he said, reaching down to pet the purring bundle of fur that threatened to trip him as he went inside. "Miss me?"

Shasta made a chirruping sound and ran into the kitchen to stand near her food bowl.

"You still have food," Jared told her. There was at least a quarter cup of dry cat kibble at the bottom of the dish.

She meowed again, more insistently.

"Fine." Jared sighed and scooped some fresh food into the bowl, and Shasta began to eat it.

He took a shower and ate a dinner that didn't take much more time to prepare than the cat's -- a few slices of cold deli meat on bread, a smear of spicy mustard, and a glass of ginger ale with enough ice cubes in it to make the glass sweat. It was late fall, the air crisp and cold once the sun had set, and Jared went to sleep listening to the sound of the wind making the big maple tree beside the bedroom scrape its bare branches against the siding.

He dreamed of Kyle, of the psychic flashes the man had been enduring, visions of people being carved up with knives, the perspective as if it were his own hands doing the killing. A woman -- he didn't know what she looked like, that part was blurry -- screaming, high-pitched enough to hurt his ears. A tall man in a shirt and tie falling back against a wall, sliding down, bright red blood staining the white fabric.

Waking with a gasp, sweat prickling at the back of his neck, Jared sat up and fumbled for the light. The cat gave him a dirty look and jumped off the bed, disappearing into the shadows. Jared glared in the direction she'd gone; the whole point of having a cat was so he'd have something warm and comforting at times like this, and she couldn't even cooperate. "Thanks a lot," he said, voice still rough with sleep, and lay back down.

Maybe he'd just sleep with the light on. The dream had been particularly vivid -- either Kyle's detailed descriptions had affected him more than he'd thought, or that had been some bad smoked turkey he'd had for dinner. Of course, he was pretty sure it was the Kyle thing. He couldn't remember a time he'd brought his work home like this. Usually, he didn't have any trouble leaving it at the office.

He'd put in a call to his supervisors after the session was over, as protocol dictated, to report the details of Kyle's visions. There was always the possibility that Kyle was seeing things that hadn't yet come to pass, or that something he'd seen would help solve a murder that had already occurred, and what would be the point of training people with psychic abilities if it couldn't do that?

Come to think of it, having to relay Kyle's experiences over the phone like that had probably been what had tipped Jared over the edge.

He was just starting to doze off again when the phone beside his bed rang, sharp and shrill, setting his heart pounding. He reached for it, knocked it off the table onto the floor, and had to lean down to grab it, sleep-slow fingers barely closing around the plastic handset. "Hello?"

"Hi, Doctor McCormick -- it's Kyle. Um, Kyle Griffin. I know it's the middle of the night, but -- you said I could call any time, and I -- I saw something else. A little while ago."

Jared wiped a hand across his face and licked his dry lips. "No, it's fine. I'm glad you called. Were you awake when you saw it?" It was easy to slip into his role, even half asleep like this.

"You mean, maybe I was dreaming?" Kyle sounded impatient. "No. No way. I was awake. I mean, I *was* dreaming, before. Then I woke up, and I went to the kitchen to get a drink, and then... I saw it."

"What? What did you see?"

"Blood." Kyle said it in a low voice. "I was walking down the -- down some stairs into a basement, and there was just -- blood everywhere. It was on the steps, and on the concrete floor, in -- handprints, like someone had been slapping at it. And I went -- I went --" His voice hitched and he started to cry. "I can't do this anymore. I can't --"

"It's going to be okay," Jared said, projecting as much reassurance into his voice as he could. "I know it feels overwhelming now, but --"

"But pretty soon I won't *care*?" It was difficult but not impossible to understand Kyle through the tears. "You're not listening to me. *I can't do this anymore!*"

"I hear you." Jared was alarmed now. "I'm listening, Kyle. Now you listen to me. We can filter this --"

"*I can't!*" Kyle shouted. "It's not right! People shouldn't *do* things like this, they shouldn't, and I --" He took a shaky breath and said, more quietly, "I have to stop this."

And hung up before Jared could say another word.

He immediately disconnected his end of the line and tried to call back, but all he got was a busy signal. Swearing under his breath, he got out of bed, tripping over the cat as he stumbled toward his tiny home office, which was really more just a corner of what should have been the dining room, but wasn't because he always ate in front of the TV. He called Shaun while shoving papers aside in an attempt to find the torn-edged scrap that had been taped to his desktop monitor before falling off and ending up hidden among everything else.

"It's the middle of the night," Shaun said instead of 'Hello' when he picked up.

"Tell me the number for Records," Jared ordered. Shaun remembered everything -- he'd have the

number memorized, along with a hundred others.

"What? Why?" Shaun said, then rattled it off. Jared copied it down, repeating it. "Jared, what's going on?"

"That new student is going off the deep end," Jared told him. "I've got to get over there before he does something drastic."

Shaun made an anxious sound. "Protocol says --"

"Sorry," Jared said, and hung up. He knew what protocol said -- he was supposed to phone the emergency branch of the main office so they could dispatch security to, he was pretty sure the proper terminology was, 'contain the problem.'

The thing was, he'd always had a hard time seeing people as problems, no matter how messed up they were. And Kyle's issues weren't Kyle's fault. If Jared could just get to him, talk to him...

Records was an automated system; it didn't take long to get Kyle's address. Jared shoved his feet into his old sneakers, not bothering with socks, and ran for his car. Thank goodness Kyle's place was close by -- it just as easily could have been all the way across town. No traffic this late at night, at least. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket just as he pulled up to the curb outside Kyle's house. He jumped out of the car, fumbled the phone out and looked at it to see who was calling: Shaun. He didn't answer, instead hitting the ignore button as the same time he tripped over his untied shoelace. The phone clattered on the pavement; he bent and picked it up, shoving it into the easier-to-reach cargo pocket of his pants.

Jared didn't hesitate; he ran right up onto the porch of the duplex and banged on the left hand door, which had Kyle's house number next to it. Then, when there was no answer, he knocked again. "Kyle! It's Jared -- Doctor McCormick. Let me in!"

Still no answer, although after another minute or two of shouting, the adjacent door opened, revealing an elderly woman in a thin, flowered nightgown. "What's going on?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Jared said. "Do you know the young man who lives here?"

"He's my tenant," she said. "Has something happened? Has he done something wrong?"

Jared shook his head impatiently. "No, not at all. I'm just -- I'm a friend, I'm worried about him. He was upset."

There was the sound of locks being undone; the door opened, and Kyle appeared, a dishtowel in his hands. "Hi," he said. "Sorry, I was just..." He peered around the corner at his landlady and gave her an apologetic grin. "I'm really sorry, Mrs. Bettencourt, I didn't mean for you to get woken up."

"Well, that's all right," she said grudgingly. "As long as it doesn't happen again." And she closed her own door.

"Can I come in?" Jared asked Kyle.

"Sure," Kyle said, stepping back and making room for Jared to enter. "I'm -- God, I'm really sorry about before. I know I must have sounded, I don't know, pretty crazy." Now, he sounded calm, almost serene.

"You did," Jared said, going inside. He wanted to make sure Kyle was really okay -- that he wasn't just putting on a front. "I was worried. I tried to call back and you didn't answer."

"I know. I'm sorry. I was, um, doing some chores. Trying to relieve the tension. I can't believe you came all the way over here just to check on me." Kyle was studying Jared's face while idly continuing to dry his hands on the dishtowel he was still holding. "Tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing you don't usually make house calls."

Jared shook his head. "No -- we're not supposed to. But I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I am, now that you're here," Kyle said. He looked up at Jared -- standing, Jared was a good five or six inches taller -- and inched closer. "You must be a really good therapist. I mean, with the way you care about people and everything. Although I guess most people aren't as messed up as I am."

"Most people aren't dealing with the kind of stuff you're dealing with," Jared said truthfully.

"I just -- I don't know what to do." Kyle ran a hand through his hair. "I think -- I think maybe I really am crazy."

"You're *not* crazy," Jared said.

"How do you *know*?" Kyle asked. He was standing close enough that Jared could see tears glistening in his eyes. "I'm serious. I need you to tell me. How do you know?"

"I just do," Jared said helplessly, right before Kyle kissed him. It was almost as surprising as the first time, and Jared was so worried about upsetting Kyle further that he didn't push him away as quickly as he should have. As Kyle's lips brushed his, Jared had a brief, bizarre flash of memory -- it had to be a memory, didn't it? -- of kissing Shaun, of Shaun's mouth on his, and he found himself wishing that Kyle *was* Shaun.

Then Kyle's tongue brushed tentatively against his, and Jared pulled back.

"Kyle..."

"It's okay," Kyle said, one hand on Jared's hip, lips tracing his jaw. "You're not at work. You don't have to be my therapist -- get me assigned to someone else, if that's the only way we can --"

"We *can't*," Jared said firmly. Over Kyle's shoulder, he could see into the dining room, where the table looked like it had been shoved to one side. From the ceiling, a thick rope, like heavy clothesline, hung down.

"Kyle," Jared said. "Were you... were you going to --"

"Kill myself?" Kyle finished for him, lifting his head and meeting Jared's gaze. "Yeah, I was. But now that I know -- now that I know how you feel about me, coming all the way over here in the middle of the night... now I don't have to." His eyes gleamed. "I know you have to say all that stuff, about not getting involved with your clients. It's okay. We can keep it all a secret." His hand stroked over Jared's hip enticingly. "I'm good at keeping secrets."

"I'm sure you are," Jared said, trying to find the right tone of voice, to strike the right balance between convincing and soothing. "But that doesn't change anything. We can't have a relationship. I'm sorry."

"We have to." Kyle pressed forward against him. "I need this. I need you."

"You can have me," Jared told him. "As a therapist. As a friend. Just a friend."

Kyle let his head drop down, his forehead coming to rest on Jared's collarbone. "Please," he said, voice quiet. "Please, don't do this."

"I'm sorry," Jared said again.

"So am I," Kyle said, and shifted his weight.

Something heavy and hard slammed into the side of Jared's head with shocking force, and the room went dark.

A bird was chirping outside the window; Jared could hear it. Why was his pillow so hard? God, his head was throbbing and that bird wouldn't *shut up*.

Oh. It was his phone. Somewhere. Where was his phone, and when had his bed turned into a concrete floor? Slowly, Jared fumbled a hand into his pocket, but didn't find his phone. It chirped again. Dimly, he remembered having put it into the lower pocket, the one just over his knee. He found it and flipped it open to the sound of Shaun's voice already talking.

"Jared? Thank God. I tried to call before and you didn't answer! I thought -- I thought you were -
- Kyle thinks you're dead."

"Good thing he's wrong," Jared said, then groaned as his head throbbed. "*Fuck me*."

"I've been trying for years," Shaun told him, quipping even in the middle of a truly fucked up situation. "What do you see? Is there any way out of there?"

"I don't even know where I am." Belatedly, Jared realized he should lower his voice. He pushed himself to a sitting position and looked around. He was in a basement. Kyle's basement? He touched the side of his head where it hurt the most and his fingers came away tacky with clotted blood. "He -- he *hit* me."

"I know," Shaun said. "I saw that part. Him hitting you, and then dragging you down the stairs." Jared realized his friend had cheated, broken the rules and deliberately sought out Kyle's thoughts. "God, Jared, I thought you were dead." Shaun's voice broke.

"I'm not." Jared got up, wavered on his feet, and found his balance. The basement was poorly lit, with piles of boxes stacked up like a crooked maze and cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. Kind of like a horror movie, Jared thought idly, as he rounded a corner of cardboard-box-wall and came incredibly close to tripping over something kind of large and rumped. He blinked, stared down at the shape as it stopped being meaningless and became what it was -- the body of a man. And beyond it, another one. And a third beyond that. "Oh, shit."

Shaun swore in a low, horrible voice. "Deep breaths, Jare. How badly are you hurt? God, I'll fucking rip his head off, I --"

"There are bodies here," Jared hissed into the phone.

"I know," Shaun said simply. "I saw them, too. It's gonna be okay -- the cops are on their way, and so I am. I'm in the car. I'm turning onto the street now."

Jared's chest tightened at the thought. "Don't you dare. Shaun, he's *crazy*. I didn't think he was -- I didn't know."

"Can you get out of there?"

"I don't know." Jared looked around but couldn't see a door other than the one that led up the stairs. He was very careful not to look at the bodies. "There aren't any windows. Just the stairs, and I think he's up there." He *knew* Kyle was up there. Now that he was paying attention, he could hear the footsteps. Which meant if he yelled, maybe the landlady would hear him... but what would Kyle do to her if he did? What would Kyle do to *him* if he knew he was alive instead of dead?

"Don't go up there," Shaun warned him. "Just stay where you are and keep quiet. He's insane, Jared. Really insane."

"He'd have to be," Jared said. From above, there was a scraping sound, like something being dragged across the floor, and then the sound of approaching sirens. "I can hear them. The cops."

"I'm pulling up behind your car," Shaun told him. "I'm right outside." He made a sudden sound,

like a gasp and a groan together, and upstairs Jared heard a thump.

"Shaun?"

"Hang on," Shaun said. "Sit down. I'll be right there."

The front door being forced open was loud even from the basement. Jared could hear the policemen shouting. Someone said, "Get him down!" Muffled thuds and a scuffle, confused voices. At the top of the stairs, the door to the basement banged against the wall, and Shaun called, "Jare?"

"I'm here," Jared said, and watched as Shaun's feet and legs and waist and then his face, worried and pale, appeared. Jared's legs gave out suddenly and he would have hit the floor if Shaun hadn't gotten to him in time.

"Easy," Shaun said. "Didn't I tell you to sit down?"

Jared did, now, gratefully, hands clutching onto Shaun's soft T-shirt. "Jesus, I'm glad to see you."

"Me, too." Shaun's arm was around his shoulder. "It's okay. I'm here. Hey, it's okay."

"I'm fine," Jared said, not realizing until then that he was shaking.

"Of course you're not," Shaun said. "Give yourself a minute, then we'll get you upstairs and have someone take a look at you."

"Where is he?" Jared asked. "Kyle. Is he -- did they catch him?"

"You could say that." Shaun cupped Jared's face in one hand, which felt more reassuring than Jared could have imagined. "He's dead, Jare. He hanged himself."

Jared closed his eyes. "You knew. You knew he was going to."

"Yeah," Shaun admitted.

"If you'd told me," Jared said desperately. "If you'd told me, maybe I could have stopped him."

"No," Shaun said, shaking his head. "He would have killed you, and then he would have done the exact same thing anyway. I *felt* it. I know you wanted to help him, but -- I think he was beyond help. Even he knew it. God, Jared, I'm so sorry."

"So am I," Jared said, and then all he could do was bury his face in Shaun's shoulder and hold onto him and cry.

Later, when Jared managed to get his feet under him again, Shaun helped him upstairs and one of the paramedics checked him out. The prognosis was a mild concussion that probably warranted a trip to the hospital, which Jared refused. Besides, it was a job requirement that he check in and answer questions as soon as possible after an incident like this. The general public didn't like finding out that the Talented among them were running rampant -- there'd have to be damage control before the story hit the morning's papers.

By the time that was taken care of, Jared was so exhausted he felt transparent. He'd never been so grateful for an arm to steady him as Shaun walked him to his car and got him into the passenger seat. "I can drive," Jared protested. It was probably the stupidest thing he'd said all night, and he'd said a lot of stupid things.

"I know," Shaun said, instead of any of the hundred other things he might have, and got behind the wheel, and drove him home.

"I was right," Jared said as they walked up to his apartment building.

"About what?" Shaun asked.

"About thinking there was something different about him."

Shaun nodded and unlocked the apartment door. "You *were* right. He was more messed up than anyone could have guessed. We'll probably never know the full extent of it."

Sitting down on the couch, Jared rubbed his head, which was aching, and kicked off his sneakers, which he'd never actually tied. "He kissed me."

"Yeah," Shaun said, a little sadly. "I saw that, too."

"Why me?" Jared asked.

"Because he had good taste?" Shaun suggested, then grimaced as he heard how that sounded. He sat down on the coffee table opposite where Jared was sitting. "He thought -- he felt like you were safe. Like he could trust you not to hurt him."

There was more underneath that, Jared could tell. "Someone hurt him before."

"Lots of people did," Shaun said. His eyes were distant, remembering. "It was -- bad. He was insane, but he wasn't stupid; he knew what he was doing was wrong. I think part of him hoped he'd get caught."

"The rest of him just wanted it to stop."

"Are you sure *you're* not psychic?" Shaun asked, smiling at him with such affection that Jared looked at him -- *really* looked.

It was like a fog lifting. Shaun, who'd been here all this time, always there for him. "I can be pretty dense sometimes," Jared said slowly. It was meant as an apology.

"I suppose," Shaun said, and moved to sit beside him.

"I mean, it can take me a while." He turned his head, winced, and gave Shaun a pitiful look.

"Come here." Shaun tugged him over into a loose, sideways embrace and pressed a kiss to his hair.

Jared frowned and lifted his face. "Not like that. For real." He knew Shaun would know what he was talking about, and Shaun did. Kissed him, on the mouth and with such thoroughness that it made Jared's toes curl. God, how long might he have kept missing this, not even realizing that he was? He'd been so focused on the details -- all the little ways in which Shaun made his life better -- that he'd been unable to see the whole picture.

"Knew you'd come around sooner or later," Shaun murmured with satisfaction.

"I didn't," Jared said honestly, stroking a hand along Shaun's side and leaning in for another kiss. "But I'm glad you waited."

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