

**THIRD PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
11TH & 12TH GRADES**

**I CARE
◀by Jasmine An▶**

“**Y**ou’re what? *What?!*”

“Yes, blind. Sorry.”

“Is this why you’ve been avoiding me?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“How? Why? Since when?”

“Retinitis pigmentosa. Started four months ago.” Ryan’s hands were clasped in his lap, graceful fingers knotted together, knuckles white.

I sighed. He flinched, ducking his head. His hair fell forward, hiding his face and startlingly gray, sightless eyes. I wanted to grab the golden strands, yank them back, and stare into his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I didn’t try to sound so accusing, but it slipped out anyway.

“And let you see me like this?” He raised his head, glared in my direction.

“Yes,” I snapped, glared back, then realized he couldn’t see me. He heard it in my voice though and looked away, one shoulder hunching up as if he expected me to hit him. I wanted to. I would have if he could see me. Even now we still knew each other through and through.

I pushed away from the porch railing, paced back and forth with the rough wood deck prickling my feet. His head tilted towards my pacing, but he refused to look at me. Before, he would’ve got up off the porch bench, put his arms around me and made me believe that everything would be all right. But now he just sat, hands twisted together, and wouldn’t look at me. His hair fell in a thick curtain, hiding his face, separating us.

I paused in my pacing, watching him as he sat, long fingers tangled together, summer sun catching highlights in his hair. Sitting there, motionless, he looked like a shadow of his energetic, soccer-playing self. But he was still beautiful.

“You should’ve told me.”

He jumped at the sound of my voice, head whipping towards me as if he hadn’t known where I was. My heart ached. I bit my lip, dug my nails into my palms, kept my voice steady.

“If you’d told me, I wouldn’t have spent the last four months wondering what I’d done to make you hate me.”

He made a small noise, as if I’d hit him, but all he said was, “I know. Sorry.” Then very softly, “I am sorry. I don’t hate you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me? Why wouldn’t you talk to me? Why did you let me think for so long that I’d done something wrong?”

“Sorry.” So quiet I could barely hear him, so miserable I nearly cried.

Where was he? I wanted to scream. Where was my Ryan who was never afraid to shout his opinions in a crowded room, never let me push him around, never hesitated to give me a shake and tell me when I was being an idiot. I wanted him, but he wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t look at me.

“*Why*, Ryan?”

“Because I didn’t want to hear you say it.” Now he looked at me, turned his face towards me, glared as if he could see me. I saw a flicker of my Ryan in his scowl and my heart tightened.

“Say what?”

He lowered his head, drawing back into himself, away from me. “Whatever you’re thinking.” His voice came out low, flat. “That I’m disgusting or that blind people are creepy or that I’m pitiful, or that, that you can’t, don’t love me anymore.”

I stared at him, eyes wide, breath gone from my lungs, his voice ringing in my head. I was silent too long. His shoulders hunched smaller, fingers knotted so tight I could see blue veins on the backs of his hands.

“Go away,” he told me. “Go find somebody you can have fun with.”

Two strides brought me to the bench. It took no thought to drop down beside him. He stiffened, tried to move away, but I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him back.

“Who says I can’t have fun with you?”

“I’m blind, Ethan.” He was wound tighter than a spring, shoulders trembling under my arm.

“You are also an idiot. Do you think I care?”

Silence. He wouldn’t look at me, face turned towards the ground, hair hiding his expression. I shook him gently.

“You can be awfully thick, but you aren’t disgusting. Blind people aren’t creepy. You aren’t pitiful unless you sulk, and of course I still love you.”

I could’ve been holding a statue for the way he froze, stopped breathing. But he still wouldn’t look at me.

“I am mad at you though.” That made him flinch. “You should’ve told me. You should’ve trusted me. I would’ve helped. I would’ve been there.” My voice was too loud. Softer, “I wouldn’t have been alone. I missed you.”

I reached over, touched a strand of golden hair to brush it from his face. He jerked, flinching away from me. I gasped, remembered he couldn’t see me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

His control cracked, shattered like glass. Hand clenched in my shirt, face buried in my shoulder, body pressed against mine; he cried silently, but I could feel his tears.

I held him. Held him as tightly as he held me and didn’t say a word.

“I missed you too.” Soft words, spoken into my shoulder so quietly I almost missed them.

Now he didn’t flinch when I touched his hair, pulled it back into a ponytail and bound it with the rubber band I still kept on my wrist just for him.

“Don’t you dare hide from me again.” I gave his ponytail a tug, the way I used to.

“I won’t.” He rubbed his face on my shoulder then lifted his head, turning towards me. His hand reached out, found my face. Fingers slid along my jaw. “Promise.”

“Good.” Face wet with tears, gray eyes vacant, he was still beautiful. “I’m going to kiss you now. Just so you know.”

His eyes closed, lips curved into a smile. “Okay.”

