



**PUBLIC
DISPLAY**

JO RAMSEY

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Joramsey34@hotmail.com

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PUBLIC DISPLAY

Walking through the mall with Hunter was torture. Just plain torture.

All the boy-girl couples in the universe were there, strolling along holding hands or with their arms wrapped around each other so tightly I didn't see how they could even walk. Or sitting on benches draped over each other. One girl was on her guy's lap cuddling against him and making little kitten noises.

The cute. It burned.

Meanwhile, there I was with my boyfriend. Hunter Dawson. The guy I'd crushed on since middle school. Smart, funny, most likely to win every track meet and have a girl drop her panties for him at prom.

Except he wasn't into girls. A tiny little fact I'd found out completely by accident when he and I'd been assigned to do a history project together. I'd been afraid he would hate being paired up with me. Everyone knew I was gay. I'd been out since ninth grade, and people had figured it out long before that. I got hassled for it sometimes, but mostly everyone just ignored me. Including Hunter.

The first day we'd gotten together at his place to work on the project, we'd argued about how to do the visual display. And then we'd argued about whether we should ask for new partners.

And then he'd kissed me and told me he was gay, he liked my skinny little body and the preppy clothes I wore, and if I ever told anyone he would kill me. We could be boyfriends, but no one could know. I hated the idea, but hell, it was Hunter Dawson. So I'd agreed.

Here we were, six months later. Almost the end of our junior year. We were at the mall to buy clothes for our school's spring social, the only formal dance other than the senior prom. As far as anyone else knew, Hunter and I were just there as pals to help each other find the right outfits to impress our girls.

Seeing all the public displays of affection around us felt like someone was stabbing me in the heart. If Hunter was out we would still have had to be careful, but at least I wouldn't have been scared crapless to even touch him in public. But since he still wasn't out to anyone besides me, I kept a space between us and prayed we would be done soon so we could go back to my house, where I wouldn't have to worry about anyone finding out.

"Hey, Rory, you with us?" Hunter waved a hand in front of my face as we passed Hot Topic. "Dude, are you not speaking to me or something? I just asked you three times if you want to go to Abercrombie or J. Crew."

"Sorry." I wiggled a finger in one ear. "Need to clean the wax out, I guess."

Hunter snorted. "You're just watching all the cutesy couples. Getting tips for later

when we're alone?"

"Sure." *Getting tips for the fantasy world where you're out and people don't beat the crap out of people for being gay in public.* I didn't bother saying that to him. He wouldn't have understood why I wanted to be one of those PDA people. He still got fidgety when I told him I loved him, even though he always said it back.

He messed up my hair. "Come on. Get with it."

Glaring, I brushed my hair back down with one hand. I should have been glad he'd at least put his hand on me in public, but I prided myself on never having a hair out of place. If Hunter was most likely to be a star athlete, I was most likely to be the geek who shoved everyone else off the corporate ladder, and I had an image to maintain.

"Gumballs!" Distracted by shinies, Hunter hurried to the gumball machine kiosk just ahead of us. I trailed him slowly. I didn't need sugar. I needed to get the hell out of the mall and be someplace where Hunter would actually be my boyfriend.

By the time I caught up to him, he'd already gotten a jumbo gumball out of one machine and was sticking a quarter into another. He held out the gum. "Here. Want to hold my ball?"

I forced a smile and managed not to make any X-rated comments about how much fun holding his balls might be. I didn't take the gum. "Nah. I think you're okay with handling your ball."

He laughed. "Yeah. I've had plenty of practice."

Someone yelled nearby, and I whirled around in time to see a girl I knew from school slap a guy across the face. A security guard ran over to them before the girl landed another slap.

"Some people just shouldn't be allowed in public." Hunter tapped my shoulder. "Rory, wake up, man. Abercrombie next?"

I looked up at him. He had about six inches on me. Shaggy brown hair, shocking green eyes, he looked like he could have stepped out of a catalog. I still hadn't figured out what he saw in short, scrawny me, but I'd given up wondering. He liked me, at least when no one else could see, and that was what mattered.

For a couple of seconds I just stared at him and tried to let love and warmth shove aside my disappointment. Sometimes I felt like he just kept me around for amusement and sex, and I hated it.

"Yeah." I swallowed. "Yeah, Abercrombie. It's right over there, and hopefully we'll find something so we can get out of here."

"Yeah." He leaned closer to me and growled into my ear, "I can't wait to be alone with you. Being so close and not being able to touch you is torture."

I gulped and stepped back before my body did something I really didn't want it to do in public. And before I said something stupid about how we didn't have to be alone to

at least do some G-rated touching. He'd made it totally clear that coming out was out of the question until we graduated, and I didn't want to piss him off by bringing it up again.

We went into Abercrombie and Fitch, a store whose clothes I liked even if I thought their policies were moronic. I headed straight to the back of the store to see if anything awesome was on sale and started rummaging through the racks without checking to see if Hunter had followed.

"Rory?"

Hunter's voice was strained and soft, not his usual way of speaking at all. I turned to look at him.

He was on one knee holding up a plastic ring. "Give me your hand," he said in the same weird voice.

I shook my head and blinked. This couldn't be happening. Whatever the heck "this" was.

"Rory, please." Hunter beckoned at me. "Give me your hand. I need to say something."

"We're in a store." I held out my right hand and held my breath as Hunter took it. My heart pounded and I rubbed my eyes with my other hand. I had to be dreaming. "People, Hunter."

"Screw people." Looking up at me with his gorgeous eyes, he slid the ring onto my finger. "I love you, Rory Montagne."

His voice got louder and stronger as he continued. "I love you, and I hate hiding it. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I want everyone to know it."

Tyrannosaurus butterflies stomped through my gut and my heart beat so fast I felt dizzy. He had always only told me he loved me after I said it. And he was touching me in public. Holding my hand.

Putting a fucking ring on it.

"What are you doing?" I took a breath. "I love you too but you're confusing the hell out of me."

"I saw the couples." He stayed on his knee and took my hand in both of his. "I saw how sad you were. Me too. I hate hiding, Rory. I'm scared shitless of what will happen when people find out I'm gay, but I'm done pretending. I've been thinking about this a while, and now's the time."

He touched the ring with one finger. "This is my promise that I'm not going to hide anymore. I won't hide who I am, and I won't hide who you are to me. Just..." He took a deep breath and his eyes looked wet. "Don't bail on me, okay? If I do this, if I come out, I need you."

"I won't bail." My eyes watered too, and I blinked hard. I was so not going to be all sappy in the middle of Abercrombie and Fitch. "I promise. I'm with you."

“Okay.” He gave me a shaky smile and stood. Before I could say anything, he put his arms around me and kissed me hard. Right on the lips. Right in front of everyone.

The world didn’t collapse. No one called us names. No one ran screaming for security.

There were only a few people in the store, and every one of them clapped.