

# One

"If you don't hurry up, you're going to miss it," Claire warned.

"I am still ten minutes away. Did it start already?" Mary Elizabeth blew her horn at the driver of a red jeep who just cut her off. Most people would be astonished to know how aggressive the petite, subdued librarian acted when she was behind the wheel of her old Honda Civic. Many people, generally, were cautious about challenging city drivers, afraid someone would pull a gun on them. In her old clunker, Mary felt safe and protected.

Her cousin Claire had insisted Mary Elizabeth suffered from road rage. She disagreed. She suffered from an aversion to jerks who could not drive properly. There were traffic laws for a reason. Why did people insist on ignoring them? As luck would have it, New Orleans was full of such drivers. "They just sat down. Jenny and I just started watching. I'll update you when you get here. I bet this episode of 'Real Reality TV' is the best one yet."

Viewers could not seem to get enough of the installments of couples living out real life situations. Unlike the contrived television with regular people thrown into unnatural situations, this show provided a secret glimpse of actual couples going through the awkward splits. Apparently, watching someone else go through struggles made watchers feel better about themselves. Mary Elizabeth sped up a bit. 'Real Reality TV' was her one and only guilty pleasure. There was something thrilling and naughty about enjoying it, especially when the man featured on tonight's episode was on. He fascinated her like no man before.

"Didn't he just get dumped, what, a month ago? Where does he hook up with these stupid women?" Mary asked. "I told you Hotbuns was a freak," her cousin Claire laughed into the phone, using the nickname Mary Elizabeth gave the only star of 'Real Reality TV' to make multiple appearances. "You better get here fast, or you'll miss all the best parts." A few minutes later, slamming her car door, Mary Elizabeth nearly jogged to the entrance of Katrina's Aftermath; named for the hurricane which many assumed would be the death of the city of New Orleans, it was a constant reminder to doubters that the Big Easy had a long future ahead.

The heels on her black shoes almost pitched her off balance a few times, but sheer determination got her there in one piece. The May evening was unusually chilly after an earlier downpour. Her V-necked dress did not provide much protection, but it couldn't be helped. This was the only black dress she owned. Pulling her black jacket more tightly around her, Mary Elizabeth slipped into the restaurant quietly and looked around for her cousin Claire and her friend Jenny.

There they were, sitting near the back, a half wall dividing their preferred booth from the diners to their left. The staff ignored her appearance, aware she would be joining friends. The ladies didn't even look up to acknowledge her arrival; their faces were glued to the mobile phone leaning against a plant on the half wall. Each clad in black clothes and black hair, the three seemed to blend into the dark booth. "Fill me in," Mary Elizabeth demanded, slipping off her jacket, dropping it and her purse on the table and jockeying for a better angle to watch the action. "Shhh," Jenny reproached. "I can't hear." The Langois cousins engaged in a whispered argument, each nudging the other. They could pass for twin sisters, but Claire was a few inches taller and had a flare for wearing more provocative clothes. While Mary Elizabeth was more quiet and reserved, Claire was confident and outgoing. Neither looked up as they bickered back and forth, though. They were transfixed by the couple on the screen. On the tiny monitor a woman, blonde

with perfect curves and a plunging neckline, sipped casually on a glass of wine. Mary Elizabeth hated her on sight.

Her attention settled on the gentleman seated across from the woman. He wore faded jeans and a dark button down collared shirt with no fancy emblems or fashion designer names. Though she could not see from this angle, Mary Elizabeth knew he had his trusty pocket protector on, too. The blonde looked like she was ready to step onto a runway. He looked as if he had just left work to come here.

Hotbuns was a creature of habit, something which always seemed to comfort Mary Elizabeth for some strange reason. Dependable, she labeled him. Good looking in a nerdy way. She crossed her legs against the tingling feeling watching him always caused. Claire had insisted she was in lust with Hotbuns. Mary Elizabeth countered that catholic school teachers did not lust after men, they admired them. She definitely admired this one, too. "Yeah," Claire had laughed, "that's why you call him Hotbuns."

It was true, the librarian had to agree. One of her first comments on the series had been to label this guy Hotbuns. The man had an impressive ass, it wasn't a sin to notice it, right? Well, maybe it was a little sinful, especially when the admirer was thinking about that tight ass while she was taking a shower and...

It was Claire's friend, Jenny, who interrupted Mary Elizabeth's thoughts. The noise in the room was too loud to make out what the couple was saying. Having grown up with a brother who was deaf, Jenny knew how to read lips as well as use sign language. With a raised hand, she indicated she was ready to interpret the couple's conversation.

"It's not looking good for your hero," she whispered sadly to Mary Elizabeth. She, too, knew the librarian was obsessed with this guy. Jenny looked nothing like the two cousins. Having grown up in a parish off the Gulf of Mexico, she sported rich, tan skin. The Langoises were a pale lot. They avoided the sun at all cost since exposure meant painful sunburns and ever darkening freckles.

Jenny watched for a few more seconds. "She didn't even order an entree. This could be a quick break up."

Claire rubbed her hands together, watching a woman do the dumping in a relationship always made her smile. In her experience, guys did the dumping, not the other way around. "He has got to be a real freak. He goes through women faster than I go through glasses of rum and coke." She silently signaled their waitress to set them up again with drinks.

"Did you ever think he might be breaking up with her tonight?" Mary Elizabeth defended. Not one to let anyone get away with being critical of Hotbuns, she gave a counter projection. "I just do not get it. What can he possibly see in her, anyway? She's high maintenance. I bet he's bored with her already, and he wants to break it off."

"The last two dumped him," Claire reminded her. "He's probably into kinky sex. What if he gets off tying up women? Maybe he has a sex toy fetish. That bitch doesn't look like she'd go for that sort of thing. I bet she's the one who wears the pants in their relationship." As the oldest of the group, and the only one with any real dating experience, Claire felt it was her duty to enlighten the other two. Both were far too naive, especially Mary Elizabeth.

Jenny inhaled sharply and gave Mary Elizabeth another apologetic glance, "She just told him they need to talk about their relationship."

Mary Elizabeth held her breath. How could any woman in her right mind be so stupid as to throw away a wonderful guy like Hotbuns? Then another, darker thought presented itself.

What if the woman was not going to break up with him after all? What if she wanted to talk about marriage? That prospect would be ten times worse than her dumping him.

"The viewers of 'Real Reality TV' are going to eat this up. I can't wait to see what they have to say," Claire commented, but did not notice Mary Elizabeth's white face. Nor did she see the strange look of resolve which replaced it.

Jenny announced the woman had just introduced the phrase, "better off just being friends", when she noticed Mary Elizabeth suddenly stand up. "Oh, crap. Come back here, Mary. You're going to get us all in a lot of trouble if you..."

It was too late. Mary Elizabeth had seen enough. She was on a mission now. High heels clicked loudly as she rounded the restaurant and headed left. Not used to wearing heels at all, she almost slipped a few times, but she managed to stay upright. Jenny had insisted on the black attire when they met at her brother's restaurant, Katrina's Aftermath, as a safety precaution. Mary Elizabeth didn't own any black shoes so Claire had to lend her a pair. The four inch heels made her slender legs look great, but her gait was unsteady at best.

She approached the couple whose break up was being recorded live by her friends. Hotbuns seemed to notice her at once. His eyes were scanning the room long before she arrived. He must have heard her coming, Mary Elizabeth thought, but her emotions were still too out of control to worry about such things.

He didn't seem surprised or happy about her appearance. Great, she frowned, the first time he lays eyes on me, and I look like a new born calf trying to find its legs. Oh, well, it was too late to turn back now. She was sick and tired of women breaking this sweet guy's heart. It stopped now. "Why would he want to even be friends with you?" She raged at the woman seated with him.