



## *The Guy Next Door* Preview

### selected excerpt

Holly Blake studied the twisted black menagerie beneath the hood of her car. She'd never seen such a ridiculous mess of metal and wire. Coiling and curving around itself like a big blackened knot, she thought it could double for some kind of abstract art.

Surely someone could come up with a simpler plan for putting a car together. Although she had to admit she was acquiring a whole new respect for auto mechanics with each passing second.

"I can do this," she said, leaning over the left fender to look down at Emily.

"Gaaaa," Emily replied, frowning.

Holly smiled down at the baby in the pink carrier seat. "Have some faith in Mommy. I can do it. You and I are on our own and we have to start being independent." Then she turned her attention back to the mangled black mess inside the car. "Now, if I were windshield wiper fluid, where in here would I go?"

The longer she studied the car's inner workings, though, the more each part of it started to look like the next. "It's only windshield wiper fluid," she murmured, getting frustrated. "This should be simple."

*Guess I should have learned some of these simple things. I should have taken a little responsibility for some of the small duties in my life.* But she and Bill had assumed old-fashioned, traditional roles in their marriage—she'd done the cooking and the cleaning, he'd handled the cars and the lawn. And she'd never thought she would need to know where the windshield wiper fluid went. She'd never thought she'd be alone.

The heavy beat of loud rock music suddenly filled Holly's ears, slicing into the calm sounds of late summer suburbia. Glancing up from beneath the hood, she caught sight of a familiar pickup truck cutting a noisy swath down the tree-lined street. She'd quickly learned to recognize her new neighbor's vehicle by sound because no one else in her neighborhood would dare play music that loud.

Although the music blaring from the truck really didn't bother her all that much. In fact, something about it seemed to connect with a long-forgotten part of herself deep down inside, making her feel alive in a way she hadn't since she was a teenager. As she shifted her eyes across the street to find old Mr. Nutter holding his irritated German shepherd by the collar and scowling at the approaching vehicle, she suppressed a grin.

The truck careened into the driveway separated from Holly's by only a small patch of grass and a couple of thin trees, then the music died along with the pickup's engine, restoring peace to the late summer day. She heard her neighbor get out and slam the door, but she was careful to keep her eyes on the twisted black metal and not look up. She wasn't sure why.

*Oh yes you are,* that long-forgotten, suddenly-alive part of her said.

*Shut up,* her more conservative self replied.

But she couldn't deny the facts—the alive part of her spoke the truth. She didn't want to look at him because of the way he affected her body.

Every time she saw him, her nipples hardened beneath her bra. And her panties, well...they, too—or, more precisely, what went on inside them—reminded her of what it was like to be young and...*ready*. That was it. Looking at him made her feel ready. For anything. Everything.

So it was better not to look. She was a mother, after all. With a ton of responsibilities, some of which she couldn't even handle on her best days. She had to have priorities or everything would

fall to pieces. Well, the parts that hadn't *already* fallen to pieces. She had to hang on to the ones that were still intact.

She leaned over the fender to peer down at Emily again, and this time the baby smiled up at her conspiratorially.

"Don't give me that look, young lady," Holly teased her. "You're way too young to be having those kinds of thoughts. And I'm way too old."

But wait. Twenty-eight was hardly old. *It only feels that way.*

Getting the call about Bill's car crash when she'd been only three months pregnant had added a few years to her life, she supposed. And having Emily without him, facing parenthood alone, had added a few more. Even this kind of stuff—around the house fix-its and car maintenance—always added at least another one or two. Sometimes it was the little things that dragged a person down. Being both mother and father, caretaker and provider, had begun to wear Holly thin.

*But I'm doing fine.* "Or at least I would be," she muttered, "if I could figure out where this darn windshield wiper fluid goes."

"Maybe I can help."

The voice was deep. And so were the eyes, when she lifted her gaze to his. Deep and brown and downright hot. Or maybe the hot part was merely an illusion given off by the sweat-soaked white T-shirt that hugged his chest and torso.

He was a construction worker. She'd thought it before, but now she knew for sure. He wore tattered blue jeans and scuffed brown work boots, and his muscular arms bore the kind of tan that only came from working outdoors. His dark hair, wet around the edges, clung to his bronzed skin.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

*Okay, speak now. Say something. Anything.* "You didn't." She shook her head, probably too vigorously. "I...I...I'm confused."

"I can see that," he said with a smile. Heat filled her veins and she feared she might faint. What had the weatherman said about the temperature today? Eighty degrees? It felt more like a hundred.

"I...don't know anything about cars," she explained, shifting her glance back to the blackened tapestry of the engine. "And I'm...out of wiper stuff."

As he took the plastic jug of blue liquid from her hand, his fingers brushed against hers, and some kind of tremor shook her. *Great—first unbearable heat, now earthquakes.* Although he didn't look too alarmed, so she quickly deduced that the earthquake must just be inside her. *Geez, get hold of yourself.*

"I can take care of that for you," he offered. Reaching into his pocket to pull out a small red bandanna, he used it to unscrew a cap previously invisible to her in the tightly wrapped metal. Then he began to empty the container, the blue liquid flowing smoothly into some dark, hidden area beneath the hood.

When he'd recapped both the windshield wiper fluid and the car's receptacle, he shoved the bandanna back into his pocket and stretched one strong, tan finger toward the black cap under the hood. "See," he explained, pointing. "It's right here, mounted on the fire wall, next to the transmission dipstick."

"Okay," she said, trying to make a mental note. "Thanks." Dare she risk looking up at him again? It seemed a dangerous move. But she really had to—didn't she?—to be polite. So she cautiously lifted her gaze.

"I'm Derek Cassidy," he said.

Unfortunately, his delicious brown eyes had already pinned her in place and again denied her the power of speech. So she simply stared at him.

"I just moved in next door to you a couple of weeks ago."

He motioned over his shoulder and Holly managed a nod.

"And you are?" He leaned slightly forward and asked with a small grin.

*Melting. Like butter in the sun.* "Holly," she finally sputtered. "Holly Blake."

Derek smiled, flattered at her breath taken response to him, but maybe not altogether surprised. His father hadn't given him much, but one thing he had passed on to his son was a way with women.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Holly Blake."

“You, too,” she said, finally offering him a smile of her own.

She was pretty when she smiled. Of course, she was also pretty when she *didn't* smile. Which was what had brought him over here in the first place. She hadn't looked much like his type, but arriving home to see her puzzled expression beaming down over the engine of her car had been an invitation he couldn't resist.

“I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come over,” she added.

“Driven around with dirty windows, I guess.”

She blushed. “Yeah, I suppose it wasn't exactly a catastrophe, was it? I'm just not really used to doing these things.”

“Husband away on business?” he ventured, mentally crossing his fingers that there *was* no husband.

She bit her lip, then looked uncertainly up at him. “Husband just...away.”

Hmm, this was getting interesting. “Away?”

“I'm kind of...widowed,” she replied.

Oh crap. Her husband had *died*, and here he was, fishing for information like a schoolboy in heat. “I'm sorry,” he rushed.

“It's all right,” she said. “It was a year ago. But sometimes it still seems...like yesterday.”

Okay, he knew when a woman was sending him a message. If the words didn't plainly say it, the nervous eyes did. She was recently widowed and not ready for romance yet.

Which was probably just as well in the long run. Because his original instincts had been correct—she wasn't his type. Dressed in tailored shorts not meant for doing chores, along with an embroidered summer top tucked tightly in at the waist, it was easy to see that she was a prim and conservative woman.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. But it wasn't his usual fare.

“I'm really sorry,” he felt the need to say again. “About your husband.”

“I’ve adjusted,” she insisted in a bolder tone that surprised him a little. “I mean, except for times like this, when I’m trying to put in windshield wiper fluid and that sort of thing.”

He smiled and nodded. “Well, I’m right next door whenever you need anything,” he told her. And he meant it. Even if there wasn’t a romance in the works, he was a sucker for a pretty lady in distress. And who knew—maybe eventually she’d decide she wanted to be more than just friends. He thought the confident tone he’d detected in her voice just now might have held a hint of promise he hadn’t heard there at first.

“Thanks,” she said, now glancing down and suddenly looking almost shy, maybe even delicate in a way.

And the unexpected expression made his heart feel somehow as if it were bending inside his chest.

He quickly shook the sensation off. What the hell was *that*? Well, didn’t matter—it was over.

But he still wanted to make sure she understood just how available he was—should the need for help arise. “Anything breaks or falls apart,” he said, “I can probably fix it.”

Then he reached in his back pocket to fish out his wallet. Opening it, he pulled out a business card—only slightly smudged with dirt—and slid it between her fingers. “Here’s my number. If you need me.”

\*\*\*

**[Order \*The Guy Next Door\* today!](#)**