



Blurb

He makes her feel like a woman...

Mechanic Ronnie Taylor spends most of her time with men. As such, she's always been tough, but Diego Molina makes her feel the opposite of tough. The big Cuban is brash, bold, and gets under her skin. She finally has to admit the reason he annoys her isn't because she dislikes him. It's because she likes him a little too much.

When Diego turns the tables on Ronnie, he uncovers the sensual woman hiding underneath. But past regrets threaten to derail their new relationship. Before they can get to forever, they must trust that they've found what they've been looking for all along.

One of the Guys

by Delaney Diamond

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Chapter One

The bright sunny day contrasted in the extreme to Ronnie's dark mood.

Months ago, she promised herself to steer clear of blind dates and setups. They always ended in disaster. Yet somehow her well-meaning, meddling cousin Anika missed the memo and invited Ronnie to Shula's for dinner and drinks, all the while planning a setup.

Ronnie should have known something was up when Anika suggested—multiple times during the initial phone call—that she wear a dress and “put on a little makeup.” They'd barely sat down when Anika's coworker, Edgar, just happened to run into them and, upon her cousin's insistence, joined them for dinner.

As expected, the night ended miserably. Edgar's car wouldn't start. Luckily, instead of her father's car, Ronnie drove her pickup, her vehicle of preference. She loved her baby and rebuilt the engine herself.

After diagnosing the problem, she pulled out her toolbox and went to work, right there in the parking lot of the restaurant. Dirt and grease stains soiled the red shirt-dress she wore, but a grateful Edgar was able to drive his car home.

Ronnie slammed the door of her older model blue Nissan 4 X 4 and trudged up the driveway to the two-story red brick house she shared with her father. The scent of freshly cut grass filled her nose from her neighbor's yard. Five years in a row, Dr. Reynolds, the professor who lived next door, had won the homeowners association's beautification award. Not only because he kept his bright green grass cut low, but because the giant hydrangea bushes on the street side of his fence burst with purple color and added charm to the quiet block.

“Hey there, Ronnie.” The professor waved from the sidewalk, his brown and white Shih Tzu strutting along ahead of him with her nose in the air.

Ronnie waved back. “Good morning, Dr. Reynolds.”

The automatic reference to the time of day caused her to glance at her watch, and she grimaced at the lateness of the hour. Eleven thirty, half the day gone already, and she still needed a shower and change of clothes before going to work.

She smiled at the early blooms of the Knock Out Roses her father planted in the fall, and made a mental note to tell him to trim back the bushes.

Quiet greeted her when she entered the house. Her father must have left for the grocery store already. The soft soles of her cross-strap flats hardly made a sound on the old cherry

hardwood floor when she eased by the table and oval mirror in the entryway.

“Do you know what time it is?” Ezekiel Taylor’s gravelly voice filled the air.

Ronnie winced at the disapproval in his tone. Without turning around, she greeted her father. “Good morning, Daddy.”

“Good morning? It’s almost noon.” Clearly he was in a foul mood.

She sighed and plastered a smile on her face before turning to face her father’s wrath. “It’s still morning, though.”

At five foot six, Ezekiel was only four inches taller than his daughter, with a stocky but firm build. His skin, a shade lighter than hers, was back to its brilliant glow, when only a few days ago he’d had an unhealthy gray pallor during his recovery from a bout with pneumonia.

Her father spoke gruffly, but she never paid him any mind. People who didn’t know him well thought he was rude, but she was accustomed to his tone.

“I brought you lunch.” She held up the bag, a peace offering she had the foresight to pick up on the way home.

He hesitated, mouth open, apparently considering whether or not to lambast her again, and then decided to go for it. “You think you can sweet-talk me with food?”

It’s worked before, Ronnie thought. “Of course not.”

Sighing, she continued to the kitchen, with her father hot on her heels, and deposited the paper sack on the counter.

“You need to call when you stay out all night.”

“Come on, Daddy, I’m grown.”

“I still worry, nugget,” he snapped.

“Dang, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

There were plenty of benefits to living at home. For instance, she always had company, and her living expenses were a fraction of what they’d be if she lived alone. The big drawback, however, was being a twenty-six-year-old woman, but treated like a twelve-year-old child.

“What kind of nonsense did Anika get you into this time?”

Ronnie washed her hands at the sink. “Nothing much. We hung out at Shula’s and she introduced me to one of her co-workers. A guy named Edgar.”

“Did you like him?”

“He was okay. Might be cool to hang out with some time.” She liked Edgar’s even-tempered personality, and he knew a lot about sports, one of her favorite topics of discussion. She removed

the po'boy sandwich she bought for herself.

Ezekiel let out a heavy sigh. "I don't understand young people nowadays. Do y'all ever date? You're always 'hanging out' or 'talking' or 'hooking up.'"

"What do you know about hooking up?" Ronnie asked, amused. She rested a fist on her hip.

"I know plenty. Whatever happened to courting?"

"I'm pretty sure it went out with the horse and buggy," Ronnie deadpanned.

Ezekiel's lips flattened into a line of disapproval, and she grinned at him. She shouldn't get so much pleasure from teasing her father.

"That's not how we do things nowadays." Ideally she wanted a meaningful relationship, but until then was perfectly fine "hanging out," as her father put it.

"Just because that's how you do things, don't make it right. In my day, you courted, and a young man showed respect by meeting a young woman's parents. That's the way your mama and I did it."

Ronnie couldn't remember anything about her mother, though she wished she could. Rosie Taylor passed away twenty-four years ago. Photos scattered around the house kept her memory alive—a large framed photo over the fireplace mantel, pictures of her in the albums in the den, and a small picture of her and Ezekiel sitting on the wall at Niagara Falls during the second day of their honeymoon. As far as her father was concerned, her mother might as well have died last week. He'd never stopped pining for her.

"Times have changed. People have evolved. Guess what? Women approach men nowadays. And they like it. Gasp." She widened her eyes for good measure.

"One of these days, love's gonna knock you on that narrow little ass of yours, and we'll see how cocky you are then."

Ronnie laughed at the prediction, one he'd leveled at her before. "Thank you for the warning. Did you take your medicine?" If she didn't stay on him, he'd forget.

He tugged the collar of his robe. "Of course I took my medicine. I feel much better, but I know the doctor said to finish the prescription."

"That's right." She pulled the second meal from the bag. "I brought your favorite from the place down on Candler Street. Catfish, French fries, and hush puppies." Once a week she let him have fried food, but suspected he cheated when she wasn't around.

"Did you remember my hot sauce?" Ezekiel asked.

"Yes Daddy, I remembered your hot sauce," Ronnie answered, rolling her eyes. She'd

forgotten one time. One time, and he never let her forget it.

“Good.” Ezekiel slathered tartar sauce and hot sauce on his catfish. “What happened to your dress?”

“I ended up under the hood of Edgar’s car.”

She told him the whole story, right down to the end when Edgar begged her to take some money but she refused. Her father listened attentively, stuffing fries into his mouth like they were an endangered food item.

“Afterward, I was tired and it was late, so I spent the night at Anika’s.”

“Remember to call next time.”

“I will.”

“How are things down at the shop?”

“Okay,” Ronnie answered, though the situation was anything but. Business at Taylor Automotive & Repair had slowed in recent months, but she didn’t want to bother him with her concerns. She’d think of a creative way to boost revenue soon.

“You still having trouble with Diego?” her father asked. He placed a morsel of catfish in his mouth.

At the mention of her Cuban business neighbor, a knot formed in her belly and her fingers tightened on her sandwich. Her father knew of him but had never met him.

“I’ve got it under control.”

Diego owned the towing company housed in the building right next door to the auto shop. Ever since he moved in, he’d been nothing but a pain in the ass. She wished he’d never bought the business from the previous owner.

“Let me know if you want me to step in. If you continue to have trouble, you can always talk to the landlord.”

“I know.”

Ezekiel grunted. “This is good catfish.”

They ate in silence for a while, standing at the counter, both enjoying their individual meals.

Chewing slowly, Ronnie studied the surroundings with critical eyes. The kitchen could use some updating. New tile to replace the linoleum, and white cabinets with new fixtures could really spruce up the space. She’d change out the lighting, too, and replace the single overhead with a row of recessed lights to brighten the room. The green stove and wall oven, which she assumed were the original, performed their functions well, but needed to be replaced with more modern appliances.

Unfortunately, business at the shop had fallen off so much, she couldn't make the updates she'd like to, and renovating the kitchen represented nothing more than an unattainable goal.

"You going out again tonight?" Her father dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

"I may go to the sports bar later. Would you rather I stay with you?" If he said yes, she'd stay and keep him company.

Ever since her mother died, it had just been the two of them. She could have long ago moved out and rented her own place but couldn't fathom leaving her father behind to fend for himself. Especially not now. He lacked the energy he used to have, and a few years ago quit working as a mechanic at Taylor Automotive—his only other pride and joy besides her. He preferred to stay busy, though, and volunteered his time at Sumpter Technical College, offering advice to the students on track to become auto technicians.

Ezekiel shook his head. "You don't have to stay with me. I'm going over to Davis's house tonight for some bachelor party fun," he said, referring to one of the deacons from church. "Can you believe him, getting married to a young thing like that, at his age?"

The "young thing" was a woman in her early forties, but being that Davis was in his late sixties, the twenty-five-year difference raised eyebrows.

"If you weren't so ornery, maybe you could find a young thing," Ronnie said. She popped a fried shrimp from the sandwich into her mouth.

He guffawed. "In five more years, I'll be seventy, girl. Ain't no woman gonna date an old fart like me."

"Davis is around your age," Ronnie pointed out.

Ezekiel brushed aside her argument with a wave of his hand. "I've got way more problems than Davis. My eyes are bad and my bones creak, and ain't no woman good enough to take your mama's place, no way."

Her heart twinged at the offhand comment. Staring at what was left of her sandwich, Ronnie thought how her father had doomed himself to a life of loneliness. The stubborn old man refused to let anyone else in. Several of the matrons at church were interested in him, but he paid them no mind, and the single widow next door—Miss Loretta—obviously liked him too, but he paid no attention to her.

Ezekiel gathered his meal and took a can of soda from the refrigerator. "You going in to the shop?"

"In a little bit, after I eat and take a shower."

“All right. I may not see you until tomorrow, since I’ll be at Davis’s.” He headed out the kitchen.

“Don’t party too hard,” Ronnie called.

His only response was a grunt.

She watched his retreating back in his ratty navy-blue and white bathrobe—where the blue had faded to powder blue and the white edged toward gray. He’d had the thing for years, and she once accused him of being cheap and threw out the robe and bought him a new one. To her dismay, he retrieved it from the trash and insisted it was still perfectly fine. Only later did she learn it was the last gift her mother gave him. She took the purchase back to the store for a refund the very next day.

Ronnie leaned her pelvis against the counter and stared out the window, Miss Loretta’s yard in her immediate line of vision. The older woman was locking up and glancing over at the house, saw Ronnie. They waved at each other and then Miss Loretta shuffled to the dark sedan parked in the driveway.

On occasion, she came over carrying a delicious pie or cake, claiming she made them to stay busy and couldn’t finish them all. The poor woman always looked all googly-eyed at Ezekiel, smiling hopefully every time she handed over one of the desserts. All she received for her trouble was a brief thank you when Ronnie returned the empty dish.

Ronnie tossed the paper sack and the cellophane from her sandwich into the trash.

She suspected her father and Miss Loretta would make a perfect match. How sad some people couldn’t see what was right there in front of them.

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