

***BLINDSIDED***

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**BLIND  
SIDED**

**ERICA HILARY**

*When you choose a partner, you've chosen a story.  
Often, you've been recruited for a play you never auditioned for.*

**-E PEREL**

*Destitute* didn't seem all that bad now; it had just been trumped. By *dead*.

A muted squeal followed by the thrump of a cork being wrenched from a bottle.

“The *how* is your job. I don't care to know details. I simply want to know when it's done. It's awfully hard to bear such a tragic accident,” he said sadly.

A glass was placed firmly on the granite. Liquid was poured generously.

“The gentleman is automatically accorded everyone's empathy—you see? The widower that soldiers on. And when he finds love again, whoever it's with, everyone will be on his side. He deserves it, after all.”

The cracked plaster of the walls in the tiny closet squeezed in more tightly; my cell was airless and claustrophobic. Anxiety was no longer inanimate. It clawed at me. From the inside out. An alien straining to escape the constraints of my body.



## CHAPTER 1

### COLD OPEN

*Crack.* An emphatic smack on the bumper jolted my silver car forward in the otherwise quiet parking lot, jerking me sharply against the snug seat belt. *Damn it. Not today.*

Massaging the back of my neck, I winced, shaken more by the memories it stirred than by any physical injury. The jarring crunch of metal on metal always transported me back to my parents' tragic fate. My heart twisted in my chest.

*Breathe.* Like my sensei said: *Deep breathing allows for clarity of mind and emotion.* In and out, in and out; my pulse steadied. Sighing, I flipped my sunglasses to the top of my head and pushed sun-streaked blonde hair from my face. I peered in the rearview mirror.

The shiny black SUV that hit me loomed large over my tiny BMW. Naturally. It couldn't be a fair fight, could it? That behemoth versus my just-off-the-lot Matchbox car. A glint in my side mirror, movement—the other car's door opened, but no one emerged yet. Wiping away my prickly expression, I threw open my own door and stepped out to see what dope couldn't navigate a routine parking lot.

I heard him from inside his car before I saw him. *Oh.*

“Sorry, that's totally on me. A bit knackered today.”

A charming English lilt. Didn't hear that every day in Washington, DC.

Grasping the car doorframe over his head with one hand, he swung his long legs out. Dropped from the Range Rover to the

concrete in one fluid motion. Athletic, compact. Cool move for a guy in jeans, maybe, or board shorts—entirely unexpected from a guy in dress clothes.

And I was captivated by his ... everything. *Holy helloo.*

Exasperated with himself, he coolly tugged a business card from his breast pocket without looking up. “Just have someone ring this number here. It’s my assistant, Emma.”

Have *someone* ring this number? Well, there was our first teeny issue; I didn’t have a “someone.” My someone was just me. Did everyone else in the world have a someone?

To this guy, this episode was simply a nuisance to be delegated.

“She’ll look after you,” he said, thrusting the card in my direction, only the tips of his index and third fingers holding the edge. When I failed to reach back, he looked up brusquely.

All at once, his agitated demeanor softened, and the detached facade evaporated. *Yikes.* Tanned. Tall. To me, anyway—I was barely five foot six, so he had to be six feet. Square, slightly too-strong jaw, meticulously tousled auburn hair. A touch of silver at the temples. *Forty? Midforties?*

His once-polite smile morphed into a zero-to-sixty grin. The hand with the card dropped back to his side. Cocking his head and turning up the wattage, he crinkled his eyes disarmingly.

Sorry, you’re wasting your wattage on the wrong girl.

My friends teased me: I’d been impervious to men since my divorce. Cornered into ending a dysfunctional marriage yet blamed for its demise. Alex had cast himself as the victim. Even to our daughter. “Mommy wants the divorce. I don’t.” *Men.*

Immune to all men the past few years, I automatically delivered them the “Reilly Heisman.” As in the make-*no*-mistake you’re-staying-at-arm’s-length vibe.

Parking Lot Guy was apparently exempt, his curiosity undeterred; his smoky hazel eyes flickered up and down. Dropping from my eyes to my mouth and lingering. On my lips.

I ... I was speechless. Ironic, since being extemporaneously charming was my most marketable attribute in broadcasting. I slightly opened my mouth, once, twice. *Oh, come on!* Social Interaction 101—you speak, I speak, you speak. And yet his eyes remained on my lips. My eyes on his eyes, the lush sooty lashes. And I ... closed my mouth again.

Words, I know words.

“My sincere apologies,” he said ingenuously. One dimple appeared, a single freckle embedded deeply within. He slid the card back into his pocket. “Not to worry, I’ll see to it personally that this is taken care of.” The french cuff of his pale-blue shirt peeked out from his suit sleeve. Classic Tiffany silver knot cufflinks gleamed. Dignified, pulled together, ready for his close-up. And then there was me.

I hadn’t exactly dressed for a meet-cute parking lot moment—in fact, I’d *undressed*. After my “Life of Reilly” segment, I’d peeled off the body-conscious teal number, swapping it out for Sweaty Betty workout gear. *Ugh*. At least they were new, not the everyday utilitarian ones. Still, though, I was wearing spandex. And this guy was french-cuffed perfection.

“I’m Rick. Rick Lynch. And *you* would be Reilly,” he said, hands spread apart and raised up as though pleased he’d correctly answered the game-winning question.

*Oh*, so he knew me. Or the TV me, anyway (a carefree, looser version of the real me, the one with no backstory and no baggage). A point for that, I supposed. *Still not happening, bud*.

“Nice to meet you, Rick. Considering,” I managed, adopting a wry smile.

Almost apologetically, he followed up. “I’m with Butler.” Smile gone. Of course he was.

Butler Industries. *Figures*. I couldn’t get a break.

It had just been announced, to some consternation, that a private equity firm had purchased our station. We’d been through

this before. They didn't care about us—they consolidated; they trimmed. Translation: they downsized; they fired. Any change in my life right now would be a disaster. I was looking down the barrel of a tenuous transition as it was.

Gripping my hand firmly, he was one of *those*—he clasped his other hand over mine immediately. The doubly-nice-to-meet-you shake, the one I was never sure was authentic. An electricity passed between us, an actual shock. I froze.

With a start, he said, “Your hand is ice cold, and it’s got to be eighty degrees out!”

My gaze followed his, the sight of our hands intertwined oddly mesmerizing. The acute tingle was unexpected. And undeniable. Snatching my hand back, I tucked it in my pocket, curled it into a ball.

Eyes still fixed on me, he was soaking it in, this crackle of energy. Incredibly, words still eluded me—nuanced, interesting ones, at any rate. *Speak*. I grabbed at the first words floating by.

“Cold hands, warm heart,” I said, the trite phrase slipping out before I could stop it. *Cringe*. Having no words at all had been infinitely better. *Zero game*. Less than zero.

I sensed our satellite trucks weaving around us, overburdened with equipment for remote broadcasts, engines revving with the effort. Muffled chatter as anchors and producers passed by. But here I stood with this virtual stranger, in this alternate universe. So far from our dingy studio lot, yet engulfed in the long, triangular shadow cast by our prominent broadcast tower.

The guy was handsome, no doubt about it. Not the bland, pretty-boy handsome of our TV anchors; he had more edge, a masculine energy, a hint of a unibrow that somehow ... *big damn deal*.

He ran one hand through his shiny tangle of hair. “Most unfortunate. Come, let’s pop around to Giselle’s. I’ll handle this. *You*”—he pointed—“are not to be put out. I’m sure your life is hectic enough without me bollocksing it up.” Not waiting on my

reply, he headed to his car. “Pull her back in. We’ll put this episode behind us.”

*Pull her back in.* Kind of presumptuous, actually. A man a little too accustomed to people respecting his directives.

My annoyance flared. I was irate at his take-charge manner. Already late to kickboxing, I wasn’t about to fall into line for some guy telling me how it was going to be.

*I don’t think so, Clooney.* Calling after him, I said sharply, “I can’t. I’m late as it is.”

Turning, his eyebrows raised, he asked, “You’ve an alternative idea?”

“We could just handle it old-school, like other people.”

He tilted his head, the concept seeming foreign.

“Exchange information. License, registration ... let insurance deal with it.”

Sheepishly, he stroked the nape of his neck. “I’d ... I’d rather not put this through my insurance, if it’s all the same to you. I’m good for it. I’m not a complete screwup.”

“No doubt.” I made a point of eyeing his pricey car. “I’m sure you’re not a total screwup, but your driving record? Most definitely a little sketchy.”

“None of those incidents were my fault.” He laughed. “If you’ll join me for a coffee, we’ll ring the BMW in Bethesda, and I’ll get it sorted. Honestly, you would go a long way to making *me* feel much better about this mess.” His palm was pressed to his chest.

It was tempting in a way; no, that was a lie. Really, *he* was tempting. Disconcerting, given he was so damn abrasive. All lanky ... and confident ... and dimples ... and *I’m sorry, you were saying?* His mouth was still moving. I hadn’t heard a word. “Sorry?”

“Good to go then?” he asked, poised at his car in his springy, athletic way.

Still fuming that my logical suggestion had been summarily dismissed, I was unable to conjure another reasonable objection. I finally just bobbed my head in agreement.

“Excellent.” He leaned against his car and watched me maneuver into a spot. *This isn't a spectator sport.* I hadn't had parking anxiety like this since driver's ed. Over a guy who couldn't even come clean with his own insurance company. He had it, that veiled look men perfected: as though you weren't measuring up, as though you were inept at simple things.

No. This I could do; I did it every day. I knew where to break for the turn ... wait ... *now.* Gliding to a stop before the barrier, I was startled by his double tap on my window.

He grinned disarmingly as I powered the window down and motioned to the two spots I'd parked diagonally across. “So I gather you think those white lines there are just a vague suggestion, do you?”

Deflated, I saw I'd meandered badly into the next spot. Fail.

A crimson flush warmed my neck and moved up to my cheeks. Blushing. *I can't even.* Gripping the slim leather wheel, I reversed and pulled in again. Properly. Tossing my small backpack on, I stepped out and channeled my on-air composure.

“You know, I don't think I'd be quite as judgy as you if I'd just rear-ended someone in a parking lot,” I said, dropping my sunglasses back on.

With a delighted glint, he said only, “Cheeky.”

The beveled glass door at Giselle's swung open, and he motioned me in before him—I glanced sideways through my glasses at his reflection. His eyes had dropped. He was checking out my behind appreciatively. I smiled to myself. *Cheeky.* In all the right places, it seemed.

A striking flame-haired hostess greeted us with blank indifference. She tapped on a table up front, the inside of her toned arm tattooed with vertical Chinese symbols. Spying a table he preferred, Rick swept past her to a booth with a window overlooking the National Cathedral's outdoor amphitheater of curved stone and manicured grass walkways.

“This looks perfect. Thanks much,” he said, all but winking at the hostess and sliding into the quilted leather banquette. Her eyes drifted up. Annoyed at first, she was quickly smitten with his naughty-boy grin. Her resting bitch face evaporated. She smiled back brightly and removed the RESERVED card from the table to accommodate him. He had a way, no doubt about that.

“Well. A man who gets what he wants. Does anyone ever say no to you?”

“Ah, lesson number one, Reilly: if you simply don’t leave space for a no, there’s no *no*.” He draped the black linen napkin across his thighs.

*No no ... maybe for you.* With that confidence, he’d climb the Butler ladder quickly.

As the waitress filled our water glasses from a terra-cotta pitcher, she held up a rustic farmhouse slate with chalked words across it. Classic French music floated in the air: “La Vie en Rose.”

“Special today, if you’re interested. We’re trying out a new version of our caffè mocha.”

The intense fragrance of recently ground coffee beans wafted from the adjacent table, the supersize cup heaped with froth and a drizzle of syrup. “Mmm. I’ll try that, thank you.”

“I’ll join you. Deux caffè mocha, merci.” A satisfying roll of the *r* in *merci*, I mused.

“Merci,” I echoed, rolling my *r* in response. “Raising the question: How many languages can you say *thank you* in?”

“Thank you?” he repeated. “Several. But with a real grasp on the language: four. French, Spanish, Italian. English, of course.” He ticked them off on his long fingers. “My Latin is more than adequate, but I find the dead languages so rarely come in handy these days,” he added with self-deprecating humor.

Exactly, if I had a dime for every time ...

Charming, sophisticated, larger than life. Everything I didn’t need. Everything I gravitated toward. What was it that he’d said? No *no*.

Chin on his hand, he propped his elbow on the weathered wood table with interest. “Enough about me. Tell me about yourself. If you’re so inclined, of course.”

Me? What did he want to know? What was there to say? He knew where I worked so ...

“Well,” I began, “I got my first TV job in Boston. I produced the movie critic segments; I landed his job when Bo eventually left and nudged it a little more into the pop culture arena ...”

Smile lines creased his upper cheeks, one nearly intersecting with that dimple. “Well, this isn’t an interview, for Heaven’s sake; you *have* the job. It’s *you* I’m curious about, not your CV.”

*My what?* Right, curriculum vitae. My résumé. Got it.

“I’ve seen some ‘Life of Reilly’ pieces, so the career bit I get. You seem to have created quite a nice niche,” he said admiringly. “But ... outside of that?”

Our mochas appeared quietly.

“Well, lately ...” I faltered, aware suddenly that my recent personal life had been less colorful than my career. “I’ve been a little busy outside of that. Raising a teenager. Between the gig and the girl, I’ve been woefully all work, no play. But with Sloan off to college soon, I ... get my life back,” I said, selling the excitement of that with a beaming smile. The one that hid the truth.

His double take was authentic. His eyes widened. “You have an almost-grad? You must’ve made a deal with the devil to have cheated time like that. No offense intended.”

As if I’d tire of hearing that kind of compliment. “*Please*. Most of my on-air colleagues are actual *embryos*, so thank God I’ve cheated time to some small extent.”

Faux relief. He drew his fingers down his neck. “Whew. It would truly be a dodgy introduction to tap your car in the car park *and* offend you—all in one go.”

“*Tap* my car?” I shot back. “We’ll see if BMW classifies it as a tap.” A tap. *Really?*

“I suppose you’re right; we’ll see about that right now.” Placing a call to his assistant, he arranged for her to give BMW his information and to tell them to expect my car in the next few days. “Emma,” he said drolly, his eyes on me, “have I told you lately that I couldn’t manage without you?”

While he updated her, a round-faced woman with a chestnut shoulder-length bob held in place by a slim headband paused by us. “I know ...” Then the recognition. “*Oh*. You’re Reilly Anderson, right? I ... watch you. We always have you on in the fitness center at Equinox.”

My turn to amp it up now for a loyal viewer. ABG, our mantra: always be gracious. Slipping into work mode, I smiled. “Well, hi. I totally appreciate that. What’s your name?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s Britany. I ... didn’t mean to bother you. I shouldn’t have ...”

“Britany. And you’re not—it’s sweet of you to say hello. I was noticing your skirt, by the way. Super cute.” The cheery, oversize daisy print suited her and her sunny disposition.

“Thanks for saying so. My daughter informed me this morning that flowers are out.”

“*No*. Well, I have a tragic problem then. I’m kind of partial to a floral,” I confided.

“Ha. It’s weird, but I feel like I know you. Like you’re one of my friends. I’m sure you get that a lot. Anyway, nice to see you—in person.” Britany gave a little wave and headed out.

Rick chided his assistant with affection, “It’s nice out. Get out for lunch today. All hell won’t break loose because you actually take an hour to yourself.” Ending the call, he turned back as I wrapped my hands around the ceramic bowl of mocha and took a long sip.

“Sorry to miss you entertaining your adoring public. Must get old,” he teased.

“Not really. Except when I’m spotted after crying my eyes out at a movie. Or with the dreaded seventeen items in the

twelve-item-only checkout, hoping to squeak through with no one noticing. Just my luck. Say hi, smile bright, go with it. Without people liking me, I wouldn't have a job."

"Spot on, give them what they want. And that's *you*." He picked up the tiny oval spoon. "Curious, that. People care about you; they want to be your friend. *You* are your brand." His eyes clouded as he stirred. "With me, it's about the bottom line. My return on investment—my success at *that* is my brand. Full stop. Who I *am*: irrelevant; no one cares." Inhaling the fragrance of the mocha, he sipped. His tongue flicked at the bit of froth left on the rim.

Poignant, really; I inferred a certain loneliness. A man on an island. Intrigued, I leaned in to speak.

Smoothly, having forgotten to impart crucial information apparently, he pivoted: "Ah! All sorted about your car. You'd please me if you'd take it to the dealer; I can be relatively sure they won't bodge it."

They won't what? Oh, got it. "Bodge, a Britishism," I said, smiling.

He grinned playfully. "Hey, when called for, I can do American with the best of them." Adding in a dead-on Midwestern accent, "This is the *real* me, ma'am. Just a cowboy at heart."

I giggled; the silly impression was damn cute. Rick abruptly glanced at his sleek watch and grimaced. "Good Lord, I've been so caught up, I'm about to miss a meeting at half past."

He pulled bills from his money clip and rose in one swift motion. "Sorry to dash. Let me know how it goes with the car." With a double tap on the table, he sped off at a near jog. He hustled past the hostess, touched her inked forearm lightly, and slyly slipped a bill into her hand. A thank-you for the table, I guessed. She squeezed his arm. And he was gone.

Disoriented, I scanned the café and eyed his half-full mug. I followed him onto the street. The transformative music faded the instant the door closed, replaced by a glaring summer sun. The

two-tiered red DC tour bus ground to a stop, a plume of exhaust rising from the rear. *WTF*

The ping-ponging between annoying and intriguing, it left me dizzy.

At the lot, I assessed the damage to my car—the fender was bent noticeably in a few spots. Not bad, considering his massive SUV. Galling, though, given it was avoidable to any human paying even moderate attention to anyone beside themselves. *Come on.*

Stepping closer, I saw a paper—no, a business card—tucked in a wrinkle of the bumper. On the back in neat, block writing: *My info would help. No excuses now, no no! Rick*

Below, his cell number. And a smiley face. A smiley? Fascinating.

Flipping the textured ivory card over, I caught my breath sharply. *No. Effing. Way.*