

Without a Net

by

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Chapter 1

Eva had forty minutes to handle the most urgent messages, finish shopping, unload the groceries, and race to school to pick up her son.

That was why she nearly ran the man down.

Of course, it didn't help that the shopping cart had a wobbly wheel and a mind of its own, veering left when she steered right. It wouldn't have mattered had the aisle remained empty. Or if she'd been better at multi-tasking. The last six months had taught her a lot, but not how to manage a renegade shopping cart while catching up with emails on her iPhone.

“Whoa, there.”

She glanced up in time to see the man stagger back, straight into a display of organic, gluten-free quinoa flakes. Boxes went flying.

Eva froze. “Are you okay?”

He glanced around at the mess and then turned a pair of startling green eyes her way.

“There's a law against that, you know.”

“What?”

“No texting while driving.”

“I wasn't—” she broke off as he grinned. She experienced a sense of déjà vu. She'd seen him before, she was sure of it, but couldn't remember where. “I'm sorry. Are you hurt?”

“Nah,” he said, setting his basket on the floor. “Been through worse.”

That was when she noticed the cane, and the stiff way he held his leg as he bent to pick up a box. She dropped the phone in her bag and skirted around the cart to help with the clean-up.

“I really am sorry.”

“No worries.”

“Is your leg okay?” She glanced at the twin furrows between his brows, the light sheen of sweat on his forehead. It was a balmy sixty-eight outside, a little warmer than average for Santa Monica in mid-May. But inside, the air-conditioning kept the temperature much cooler, enough to raise goose-flesh along her bare arms. If he was sweating, he was probably in a lot more pain than he was letting on.

“It’s fine,” he said, leaning awkwardly on the cane as he reached for another box.

“Another month or two of rehab, I’ll be good as new.”

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll hand them up, you stack them.”

Their fingers brushed as he accepted the boxes, and she felt a frisson of awareness. It was so unexpected that she fumbled and one of the boxes fell again.

“Sorry,” she murmured. And then to cover up her confusion, she said, “What happened to your leg, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Tibial plateau fracture. I was skiing, and that tree—I swear, it came out of nowhere.”

She winced. “Trees can be tricky that way.”

He laughed, a warm, mellow sound that set off a fluttery sensation in her belly. “Next time, I’ll try to give the trees a miss.”

She eyed his injured leg, noting the faint pink scars around the knee, just visible beneath the long cargo shorts. Despite the loose clothing, it was clear he had an athlete’s body. Strong,

tanned calves sprinkled lightly with blondish hair, a narrow waist and lean hips, broad shoulders and well-defined biceps that flexed beneath the white T-shirt as he stacked the boxes she handed him. Bum knee aside, he looked like a poster boy for outdoor sports: disheveled sun-streaked hair, square jaw bristling with three-day scruff, white smile framed by wind-chapped lips, and a cocky attitude that radiated casual disregard for personal danger.

He must be a glutton for punishment, she decided, forcing herself to look away. She wasn't a skier herself, and couldn't understand why anyone would take to the slopes again after what sounded like a pretty serious injury. Perhaps it was some testosterone-driven need to prove himself greater than his fears. Or maybe it was all about chasing that same thrill that men seemed to get from speed in all its forms: fast cars, motorcycles, speedboats. Or it could simply be that the man didn't have the good sense to know when to call it quits.

Then again, who was she to judge? She'd played it safe all her life, and where had it gotten her? Up to her eyeballs in trouble. Widowed, a single mother to her eight-year-old son, barely able to eke out a living after years of sitting on the sidelines of the job market, and facing a legal battle to hang onto what little money there was left.

He placed the last of the boxes into the cardboard display case and offered her a hand up. When she hesitated, he quirked a brow that was a shade or two darker than his hair. "I'm stronger than I look."

There it was again, that electric sensation when their hands touched. She let go the moment she regained her feet, and stepped back. "Sorry again. I hope you feel better soon."

"I will, Eva. Thank you."

She frowned. "Have we met?"

"Your son's in second grade, isn't he? Ms. Brenner's class?"

A spurt of alarm shot through her. She edged closer to the purse she'd left in her cart, and fumbled for the iPhone. You never knew who would turn out to be a child predator these days.

He shifted, leaning more heavily on the cane. "My nephew, Connor, is in the same class."

Oh. Well, that explained it. Her heart rate calmed a bit. No wonder the man looked familiar. She studied him more carefully, noting the resemblance that she'd missed before. Connor's mom, Nina, was tall and blond as well, though her eyes were more hazel than green, and nowhere near as mesmerizing.

"The name's Max," he offered, when she remained silent. "Actually, it's George Maxwell Palmer III. But everyone calls me Max."

Of course. It was starting to come back to her. The older brother Nina mentioned, usually with exasperation over his bad boy antics. The infamous uncle whom Connor had unwittingly introduced to his kindergarten teacher, Ms. Kelly. The poor woman couldn't stop crying for weeks after the man dumped her. Ms. Schroeder, the art teacher, was next. And after her, Ms. Jacobson, who taught first grade. Rumor had it that Ms. Jacobson asked to be transferred after Max called it quits. Good thing the school year had just begun, and the teacher who replaced her was male and married.

When it came to sex, Max was the ultimate hit and run artist.

Just her luck—the first man to spark her libido since long before her husband's death was the last man she'd actually consider dating.

Not that he was asking.

She glanced at her watch. "Oh, would you look at the time! I've got to go. Lovely chatting with you, Max."

"We should do it again sometime."

She blinked. He wasn't coming on to her, was he?

"Maybe over coffee, or dinner?"

Good Lord, he was! The entire encounter seemed surreal. She shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't think so."

"Why not? We both have to eat."

"I need to pick up my son," she said, as if bringing Ben into the conversation would ward off any further advances. She made a wide arc around him, both hands firmly on the shopping cart. "Good luck with...everything."

She hurried toward the checkout lane, not bothering with the last few items on her list. She could always get cereal and yogurt tomorrow, when she wasn't rushing to get to school, and wasn't likely to run into Max again.