

Touching Lace

Chapter One

Things could be worse, she thought with a sigh. Wasn't her mother always telling her that? "Look on the bright side, Lacey." Or her favorite, "There are lots of people who have things much worse, so be grateful, Lacey."

Yeah, she should be grateful, actually—grateful she hadn't married the two-timing bastard before finding out about his cheating ways. Catching him beforehand was a definite plus. And to think, she'd thought Christy was her friend.

Lacey sniffled, unwilling to let the tears that burned her eyes fall, and ate yet another chocolate chip cookie—double the chips—and thanked the gods above for creating such a decadent treat to begin with. Tomorrow she would have to exercise double-time just to make up for the damage she was doing to her body today. But for now, comfort food. There wasn't anything quite like it.

As much as she hated to admit it, finding Evan in the shower with Christy happily washing his nether parts, no less, wasn't quite as devastating as it should have been. There was anger—yes, she could have easily taken the two of them apart with her bare hands. But hurt? Nada. It seemed like after dating a guy for over six months, a girl really ought to feel at least a twinge of the old heartstrings when she caught him being fondled by another woman. But as hard as she tried, she just couldn't seem to muster any sadness. At least not for Evan. As for Christy, yeah, that hurt. She'd met Christy one morning while jogging at the park. Christy had overdone it and Lacey had stopped to see if she needed any help. They became fast friends, finding out they had a lot in common. Apparently they even had the same taste in men. Sometimes dating seemed like more trouble than it was worth. It became harder and harder for a girl to find a decent guy.

It wasn't as if her standards were impossibly high. Sheesh! A guy with a decent job. A few morals. Single. And, last but not least, hair. Still, in the past year she'd been dumped twice and cheated on once. That had to be some kind of record.

Maybe it was her. Maybe she was the problem. Her brother Merrick was always telling her she should loosen up some, be a little less assertive. A guy liked to feel dominant, not dominated. She did have a tendency to be a bit controlling, too, now that she thought about it. Lacey ate another cookie as the truth hit her. The one common denominator in every failed relationship was, of course, her.

Then did that mean Evan had hooked up with Christy because Christy was content to let him take the lead? Was that what had drawn him to her? Possibly. Of course, it could just as easily have been her surgically enhanced C-cups.

Swallowing a gulp of milk, Lacey stood and brushed herself off. When she looked down at her own meager chest, she gave a derisive snort.

"The idiot probably thinks Christy's are real. Puhlease."

She grabbed the bag of cookies and started for the kitchen. What she really needed was some vanilla ice cream to go with her chocolate chips.

“Take that, Christy and Evan.” But before she could grab the icy treat, the doorbell rang. So much for completing her sugargasm.

She frowned at the front door. “It better not be Evan.” The doorbell rang again and she stomped—which wasn’t easy considering she was wearing a pair of fluffy happy face slippers—over to it. Lacey flung the door wide and yelled, “Get lost, dickhead!”

“Pardon me?”

Heat burned her cheeks. “Oops. Uh, hi, Nick.”

Nick smiled as if he were pleased as punch. “Do you always answer your door like that?”

She shrugged. “Only when I catch my boyfriend cheating on me with my friend.”

“Yeah that sucks. It’s also why I’m here.” He pushed his way into her apartment. “Get dressed, baby, I’m taking you out.”

Bless his thoughtful and sympathetic heart. Nick was one of the sweetest, most honorable, upstanding men she knew. In fact, he ranked right up there with her brothers. Nick was undoubtedly one of the good guys, as well as her best friend. But, right now he was seriously in the way of a very satisfying pity-fest and she just couldn’t have that.

“I’m busy, Nick. Get lost, will ya?” She retraced her steps to the kitchen in search of the treasured ice cream. Hopefully Nick would take the hint. She’d almost reached her goal when a hand yanked the back of her sweatpants. “Hey, hands off. I’m not in the mood.”

“Too bad. I’m not going to let you eat yourself into oblivion this time.”

Lacey pouted. “I’m not eating myself into oblivion.”

“Ha! Last time you were dumped, you stayed cooped up the entire weekend eating everything and anything you could get your hands on. Then you exercised yourself to near exhaustion for the next two weeks. Not this time. I just can’t take it.”

Lacey swatted at his hand and he released her. She swung around and glared at him. “Hey, get this straight. I wasn’t dumped. This time I did the dumping.” She frowned, “And just how did you know anyway? It was only a few hours ago that I found him with...her.” The picture of Christy all giggly and wet and having her way with Evan came crashing back like a bad movie.

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Nick cupped Lacey's chin in his hand and stared down at her. She was so beautiful it hurt. So delicate and yet so strong at the same time. Nick wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch for hurting his sweet Lacey. What kind of man could have her in his bed and still want other women? An idiot.

He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip and whispered, "Your mom was worried."

"Oh sure, use her why don't you?" she grumbled. "Just what I needed to top the night off right, a healthy dose of guilt."

Nick knew it hadn't been her intention to worry her mom, but he also knew Lacey well enough to realize her first reaction whenever she was hurting was to call her mother. It didn't seem to matter that she was twenty-six; evidently, mom's voice was still a comfort.

"I'm not a glutton for punishment here, baby, so if telling you your mom sent me keeps me out of the doghouse then yeah, your mom sent me." Nick dropped his hand. He was starting to enjoy touching her a little too much. Even with her messy hair and stained sweat outfit, he still wanted to take her to bed. "As good as that outfit looks on you, you might want to change into something slightly less...lived-in."

Nick was intent on getting Lacey over her melancholy, and when he sank his teeth into something, he could be downright tenacious. He smiled at Lacey's sigh of surrender.

"Okay, you win. Where are you taking me?" She turned around and walked to her bedroom.

Nick gave into the smile once she was out of sight. He loved it when she conceded to his demands. It happened so rarely. "I thought we'd go see that movie the dickhead wouldn't take you to."

That had her moving faster. She enjoyed going to the movies. It never got old for her and she was especially fond of thrillers. Damn, he hated to admit it, but he liked that she was available again. It had gnawed at his heart knowing she was with Evan. Thinking of the dickhead making love to Lacey night after night had nearly killed him.

The look of dejection on her face when she'd opened the door had him frowning. Had she cared about Evan so much? Nick hadn't thought she'd been all that into the relationship. If there was one thing he'd learned about Lacey over the years he'd worked for her brother, it was that Lacey fell into relationships more because of the comfort it gave her. She didn't like being alone.

That one little detail had gotten him over to her apartment in record time. With her latest love breakup, he didn't want Lacey to find someone else before he had the opportunity to show her how good they would be together. He had one shot to prove they could be friends and lovers. Nick had figured out pretty damn fast that he had it bad for Lacey. At first, he'd liked her quirkiness and her unconventional ways. They'd somehow fallen into an easy friendship right from the start. In fact, he felt closer to her than he did her brother, Merrick.

Lacey was the only woman he'd ever known who was so comfortable in her own skin. She wasn't insecure or dependant and he admired the hell out of her for those qualities. But beyond that was her sense of fairness and her almost painful honesty. The idea of cheating on your significant other would never even occur to her. He clenched his fist and wished he could thump something or someone in the head. Lacey should have been spared walking in and finding Evan with her supposed friend.

He'd never cared much for Christy. She was too flighty for his taste, and too helpless. He grunted. Yeah right, she was about as helpless as a barracuda. He had run into her a couple of times at Lacey's apartment and she had come on to him both times. Nick hadn't even been tempted. Christy was too in-your-face for his liking. Now Lacey, ah yeah, she was definitely to his taste. Her allure was subtler, classier. Delicate and teasing on the surface, but unrestrained and wild underneath.

He knew deep in his bones Lacey would be a fiery little thing in bed. She wouldn't hold back anything. And Evan had experienced her passion for the past six months. Six months of making love to Lacey. He could kill the bastard for that alone. But what perplexed him to no end was that having Lacey apparently hadn't done it for him. He'd needed Christy, too. No accounting for taste. The more for me, Nick thought happily.

"Okay, I'm ready. But I warn you I'm not the best company tonight."

Nick turned at the hesitant sound in Lacey's voice. She was wearing a little pink t-shirt and jeans. Tight jeans. Christ, she had nice legs. But the slump in her shoulders was enough to stop his raging hormones in their tracks.

Nick crossed the room, pulled her into the cradle of his arms and rubbed the top of her head with his lips. "You don't need to be on good behavior around me, Lace. Remember that."

"Thanks, Nick. You're always such a good friend to me," she said softly, clearly meaning every word. "You can't know how much that means."

He felt those words like a kick in the gut. Damn it, he didn't want to be her buddy. He wanted to be her lover. The very best lover she'd ever had. But she never saw him that way, not even from the beginning of their relationship. Well, after tonight she would. He'd see to it. Things were going to change.

He pulled back and cupped her chin in his hand, forcing her to look at him. "After the movie, you and I are going to have a little chat. Whether you want to or not, Lacey Jean."

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Uh-oh, things were getting serious, he was calling her Lacey Jean. A rarity for Nick. Although she couldn't even begin to guess at what could be so important. He was always joking and laughing with her. She didn't see this side of him often. Her stomach did a little flip at the intensity in his eyes and the deep tone of his voice. He really was very handsome. So tall and strong. She could easily see why women found him so appealing, so sexy.

Whoa there, girl. This is Nick, remember? Your very best friend in the world, whom you dearly love. She didn't dare wreck that by getting all hot. Rebound stuff, nothing more. She was just feeling raw tonight.

But when she went to retrieve her purse, she could swear she felt his gaze on her backside. Dang, she must have been feeling more vulnerable than she thought if she was imagining Nick eyeing her in that way. He treated her like a little sister, not an attractive female. Which was just fine by her; she didn't need to start seeing things that weren't there.

Lacey grabbed her keys, slung her purse on her shoulder, and they left the apartment. They argued over who was going to drive, as usual. Nick won, which wasn't so usual. Lacey knew she wasn't herself when she put up only a token protest.

Twenty minutes later, Lacey sat next to Nick in the dark theater, their gazes glued to the beautiful actress on the screen. A particularly nasty part in the movie had her jumping in her seat and Nick reached over and took her hand. At first, his touch felt familiar and comforting, but when he brought her hand to the top of his thigh and held it there, something altogether different raced through her body.

His muscular leg was firm beneath her fingertips, and her hand automatically began to stroke and knead. He must have liked what she was doing because she swore he groaned. It was the kind of guttural sound that made her think of naked bodies and tangled sheets. Darn it, she was doing it again. Going where she shouldn't be going—sexual territory—and it was strictly off-limits for her and Nick.

Lacey attempted to yank her hand away, but he wouldn't let go. Finally, she took a deep breath, turned and looked into his eyes. She was stunned at what she saw there.

Desire. Dark, deep, sexual heat. For her?

How could that be? Nick had never acted even remotely attracted to her. He'd teased and flirted, but that was a guy being a guy. Was she only seeing what she wanted to see? No, that wasn't it. She knew when a man was turned on and Nick was definitely turned on. She simply didn't know what to make of this new turn in their relationship.

Then, to her continued surprise, Lacey watched as Nick's lips slowly tilted upward, as if daring her to carry on with her exploration. When she stayed still and unmoving, he released her. Okay, he wasn't going to force the issue. Part of her was glad.

Part of her wasn't.

She leaned back in her seat and desperately tried to become engulfed once again in the cheesy horror, but she couldn't get her mind off that gaze. The fiery intensity and his challenging grin afterwards. He'd be something in bed, no doubt. Hmm, she wondered what he'd meant earlier when he'd said they were going to have a little chat.

Lacey wasn't sure she could handle a man like Nick. Panic crept in at the thought of being on the receiving end of someone with such a passionate nature. If there was one thing she knew about herself, it was that she was a total sissy when it came to alpha males. And Nick was every bit the alpha.

It hadn't bothered her before, because with her, he was always laid back and easy going, but she'd seen him when he was attracted to a woman. He could be downright ruthless. Nick would effortlessly toss convention and political correctness to the wind and do whatever was necessary until he got what he wanted.

The question Lacey couldn't get out of her mind was, what did Nick want now?

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