

A Lover's Touch by Brenda Jackson

Kendra Redding and Slate Landis shared an intense love affair seven years ago, but a tragedy forced Slate to leave town — and Kendra — without looking back. Now he has returned and Kendra intends to show him just what he's been missing — sizzling passion that he can get only from a lover's touch. But Kendra's looking for a strictly physical reunion — she's not about to lose her heart to Slate a second time.

Slate knows he lost the best thing in his life when he left Kendra behind, and he intends to correct that mistake. And if he can convince Kendra's body before she can convince her heart, then so be it...

Chapter One

Kendra Redding inhaled a deep, fortifying breath as she took off jogging down the sandy beach. She kept her gaze focused in front of her as she ran along the shoreline. Already the awakening sun was peeking through the sky. It would be a beautiful June day; a hot one but beautiful nonetheless.

She loved this time of the morning when most of the residents of the small beach community where she lived were still sleeping. This was her quiet time. She would be busy soon enough when she opened her optometrist office in a few hours. But now, the only sound she heard, other than the seagulls flying overhead, was the steady wash of surf over sand.

As she continued her run, Kendra thought about her father. She regretted he had lived only a few months after she'd joined him at the office last year before a heart attack had claimed his life. Her mother had died when Kendra was four, and she and her father had been extremely close.

As Kendra's sneakered feet continued to pound into the sand, she suddenly felt a tingling sensation in her midsection and the tips of her breasts became sensitive against her midriff top. She slowed the pace of her jog while scanning the deserted stretch of beach, seeking out anything that would confirm her suspicion...or rather her body's pronouncement, but saw no one.

Thinking she must have imagined things, she took a deep breath and increased the pace of her jog. Moments later she came to a complete halt. Taking another deep breath, she glanced around. This time she knew her body was not playing games with her. The tingling sensation that had been in her midsection earlier was now a deep throb that had moved lower, settling right smack between her legs; and her breasts were more sensitive than before.

Squinting, she could barely make out the jogger who loomed on the horizon, and although he was still some distance away she could tell the human form was that of a man. He was jogging at a brisk pace, seemingly as one with the elements surrounding him.

She inhaled sharply when her body reacted once again. There was only one man who had the ability to bring her body to such an aroused state, even from a distance and even after a seven-year absence. He was the man she had fallen in love with at sixteen, the man she had given her virginity to at seventeen, and the man her body had craved ever since. And although she didn't want to, she could feel his touch as though it had been just yesterday when his strong hands had stroked her body into a feverish pitch and introduced her to passion of the most profound kind.

Swallowing deeply, she forced the memories away and accepted that her body's reaction to the person jogging toward her could only mean one thing.

Slate Landis was back in town.

Chapter Two

Slate saw the feminine figure slowly jogging toward him and recognized her immediately. It was about time their paths crossed and what better place than the sandy shores of Fernandina Beach, Florida, where they had first declared their love seven years ago.

He'd tried keeping his return to town quiet since arriving two nights ago. He had been busy unpacking and getting updated on everything and everyone by Marcie Wilkins, an old friend of his deceased grandmother. He had known that there was a good chance he would run into Kendra this morning. In fact, he'd been counting on it. He had discovered over the years that there were some things in life that a man could not get out of his system, and the woman he had once loved to distraction was one of them.

His mind suddenly went back to the first day he had ever laid eyes on her. He had been twenty, a junior in college and she had been sixteen. That summer he had come to live with Ms. Marcie, an old family friend, the first year after his parents' death in an auto accident. After getting a job as a lifeguard, he had gone to the optometrist's office in town to undergo the required eye exam. Kendra had been working there, assisting her father, and from the first moment he saw her, he had been drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Sighing deeply, he tried to compose himself when he finally came to a stop directly in front of her. "Kendra." He greeted her in a low husky voice that he almost didn't recognize as his own.

"Slate," she said breathlessly, whether from the run or from startled surprise he wasn't sure. She met his intense gaze with one of her own. "You said you'd never come back. Why are you here?"

Her question made his thoughts shift to that ill-fated day seven years ago when he had left town. At the time she had been a youthful-looking eighteen-year old. Now she was a gorgeous woman of twenty-five and was everything male fantasies were made of.

His gaze did a slow burn down the length of her body. Her skimpy top and shorts made him very much aware of her bare thighs, long legs, curvy hips, and generous cleavage. His eyes then moved upward and zeroed in on her nut-brown face, which was more beautiful than ever. He knew her lips tasted just as good as they looked, full, ripe, and with a flavor that was distinctively hers.

Heat pooled low in his belly and his blood grew hot and heavy in his veins when he remembered the number of times his tongue had stroked those lips.

"Slate?"

He realized he hadn't answered her question and a part of him suddenly became obsessed with having the woman he'd walked away from seven years ago back in his life.

Feeling he had nothing to lose and everything to gain, he decided to show her rather than tell her why he had returned.

Chapter Three

Kendra didn't know what had happened. One moment she was staring at Slate, and the next moment she was wrapped firmly in his arms with his mouth devouring hers.

Her body stiffened, then relaxed as any thought of resisting him was destroyed the second his tongue entered her mouth, capturing hers and evoking memories she'd tried to suppress over the years.

His mouth was hot and sweet to the taste. Even the light musky scent of his sweat was intoxicating. Waves of desire uncoiled inside of her as he stroked her tongue, making every emotion she had skate around in her brain. He'd always had this sort of effect on her, even when she'd been too young to understand what sexual chemistry was about.

The sudden feel of his tongue on hers made all-consuming heat ignite between her legs and she heard herself moaning deep in the back of her throat. He wrapped his fingers in her hair to hold her mouth in place, as if she could possibly think of going anywhere. Although logic ruled that indulging in this kind of kiss with him was crazy, she intended to get her fill now and criticize her act of foolishness later.

When the distant sound of the horn from a shrimp boat invaded, he slowly lifted his mouth from hers. It was then that she saw that at some point she had grabbed hold of his shoulders to keep from falling when her knees had weakened.

She slowly lowered her arms to her side and felt him untangle his fingers from her hair. She realized that any attempt to pretend she hadn't been affected by his kiss would be futile, because she had been affected and had a feeling he knew it. The one thing they had never been able to hide from each other was desire. When it came to arousing her, he had the process down pat.

"Kendra," he murmured, in a low, sexy drawl, recapturing her attention.

She drew in a steady breath as heat poured through her. He was well over six feet tall, had a nice build, and was the color of semisweet chocolate. At twenty-nine he had aged handsomely and was still the kind of man who women, both young and old, noticed at first glance.

A deep frown came to her face when she remembered how easily he had walked away seven years ago and not looked back, and the pain she had suffered. "Why, Slate? Why did you come back after all this time?"

He reached out and stroked his thumb across her bottom lip, a lip still tingling from their kiss. She hoped he didn't detect the hot, fiery desire that was running rampant inside of her; however, judging by the dark, hot look in his eyes, he did.

"I'd hope after that kiss the reason I'm back would be obvious, Kendra," he said huskily in a deep voice that shook her to the core. "I came back for you."

Chapter Four

Slate focused his attention on Kendra and watched how her body stiffened with his words. Marcie Wilkins had been right. Gaining Kendra's forgiveness for leaving the way he had seven years ago would not be easy.

"Aren't you going to say anything, Kendra?"

She finally met his gaze, and when she did, he winced from the pain he saw in her features. "You came back for me? Do you think you can jog back into my life after seven years and say that?" she asked heatedly. "It's been seven years, Slate. Seven years without a call or a letter. Did you not think I had gotten on with my life?"

He sighed as he continued to meet her gaze. "No, Kendra, I didn't think that."

"Well, what did you think?" she snapped.

Now was not the time to tell her that he had thought, hoped, and prayed that, after finally coming to terms with that fateful day that had nearly destroyed him, the two of them could have a future together. He had walked away from her and everyone else because he believed that he was to blame for Susan Conrad's drowning. He'd felt there was something he could have done differently to save the six-year-old who had wandered too far out into the ocean.

Although he and Kendra had been on the beach that day, he hadn't been on duty as a lifeguard when he'd heard Susan's mother's screams. Knowing he was more experienced and could swim a lot faster than the lifeguard who was on duty, he had taken off, charging into the ocean, swimming faster than he'd ever swum before in his life in an attempt to save the little girl. But the undercurrent had been too strong and by the time he'd reached her it had been too late.

Although everyone had told him he'd done all that he could — including nearly losing his own life in the process — he had never been able to forget the look on that little girl's face as she clung to hope that he would save her. And the one thing that he had not been able to let go of was the guilt that he had let her down.

It had taken years of soul-searching, counseling, and therapy to put the past behind him and to finally let go. But over the past year he'd come to realize that although he had been able to purge the guilt of Susan from his soul, purging Kendra from his heart was not possible.

So he'd made a decision to return to win her back. He knew the odds of doing so were against him. But he had a week to show her just what his heart already knew. She was his life and there was no way he could continue to survive without her in it.

He finally decided to answer her question as he met her gaze. "What I think is that we need to talk. We owe each other that much."

Chapter Five

Once again the sound of Slate's voice evoked heat through Kendra. She forced her gaze away from his, and it came to rest on the waistline of his jogging shorts. She quickly snatched her gaze back to his face. He was the only man she knew who could get that aroused from a kiss. But then, it had always been that way between them. It was like a domino effect. His arousal would automatically trigger hers, and hers in turn would automatically trigger his.

"We don't owe each other anything, and there's nothing for us to talk about," she finally said. "You made it clear when you left that you never intended to come back."

Slate nodded. "Yes, I know that's what I said, and I meant it at the time. But I had to come back to ask your forgiveness over the way I left."

Kendra sighed. She had always understood his need to leave the beach; his need to be alone for a while to come to terms with Susan Conrad's death. But at no time had she thought he would completely shut her out and turn his back on their love.

But he had.

"I can forgive you for leaving, Slate. I understood what you were going through. But I'm not sure that I can forgive you for giving me not so much as a phone call to let me know you were okay. You didn't even contact Ms. Marcie, and the two of you were close."

"I was going through some rough times, Kendra," he said softly.

"What a shame," she said coolly. "So was I, Slate." She inhaled deeply, wanting that episode of her life to go back to the past where it belonged. "How long will you be in town?" she asked, needing to know how long she had to avoid him.

Slate paused for a few seconds before answering her question. "I'll be here a week."

Kendra nodded. Then he would return to New York. She'd overheard Ms. Marcie tell Mrs. Butternut at church a few months ago that he lived in Harlem and owned a very successful Internet sales company that he operated from his home, designing web sites and databases for major corporations.

"Are you staying at the Wilkinsons' Beach Resort while you're in town?"

"No, for privacy I'm staying in the Wilkinsons' beach house," Slate answered.

Kendra met his gaze. "The beach house?"

"Yes. You remember where it is, don't you?"

She swallowed deeply, not wanting to acknowledge all the memories the beach house generated. The Wilkineses' Beach Resort and her home were right down the road from each other, and the smaller beach house sat snugly in between the two, hidden behind the sand dunes.

The proximity of the Wilkineses' Beach Resort — where Slate had lived during the summers he'd worked as a lifeguard — and her home was the reason they had gotten so intimate, so quickly. Secret late-night meetings at the beach house had gotten to be a norm for them.

"Of course I remember," Kendra breathed. "That's where we first made love."

Chapter Six

"I still think we need to talk."

Slate's words recaptured Kendra's attention, and she took a calming breath. Being as detached as she could, she said, "I don't know if that's possible since I'm pretty busy most of the time. I've taken over the running of the shop now that Dad's gone."

Slate nodded. "I heard about your father, Kendra, and I'm sorry. He was a good man. I really liked him."

"Yes, he was, and he really liked you, too," she responded softly. That had been true. Her father had never said an unkind word about Slate, even when he knew how bad Slate had hurt her.

"I think it's wonderful that you're carrying things on the way you know he would have wanted. I'm sure he was proud of you."

Kendra nodded. "Yes, he was," she murmured thinking of how happy her father had been when she'd decided to become an optometrist.

"And I'm very proud of you, too, Kendra."

Slate's words reined Kendra's thoughts back in, and her focus was completely reclaimed by him.

"Thanks, Slate, and I'm proud of you as well. I understand your Internet sales business is doing very well. I always knew that you would be successful one day."

A jolt of grief went through her upon remembering that she'd always assumed that she would be at his side when that success came. During those summers she had often dreamed about him moving permanently to Fernandina Beach, building web sites and computer databases while he waited for her to complete college. Then the two of them would marry and build a huge oceanfront home — their dream home — on the land his parents had left him, and live happily ever after.

So much for dreams, she thought. This was the real world and in the real world dreams didn't come true.

"Well, I have to finish my jog so I can open the office on time," she said, feeling the need to move on and not let her thoughts dwell on what would never be. "Goodbye, Slate."

She took off running and refused to look back.

Slate stood rooted in place as he watched Kendra take off. His piercing dark eyes remained on her until she was no longer in sight. It was only then that he gave himself a hard mental shake. Kendra was determined not to give him any slack but he refused to let her keep him at bay. She was saying one thing but her body was saying another, and for the time being he decided to go with her body language rather than her words.

A determined smile tilted the corners of his mouth as he began jogging again. No matter what, he intended to break down any walls she erected between them. If she thought she could avoid him while he was in town she was wrong. He was determined to do whatever it took to get her back, and if he had to conquer her body before he could work his way to her mind, then so be it.

Chapter Seven

"Why didn't you tell me that Slate Landis was back in town?"

Kendra lifted her head from eating her salad and looked across the table at her best friend, Cheryl Wilkins-Huffman. The two of them had been best friends for as long as she could remember and for years they had shared everything. Kendra was the first to know when Cheryl had fallen in love with Carl Huffman at sixteen, and was godmother to their two-year-old daughter, Carly.

"The reason I didn't tell you is that I just found out myself this morning." After taking a sip of iced tea she added, "Besides, I should be asking you the same question since he's living at your grandmother's place."

Cheryl bunched her eyebrows. "The resort?"

"No, the beach house."

Cheryl's face broke into a grin. "No wonder Grandma was acting so secretive a few days ago when I dropped Carly off. Evidently Slate told her not to say anything. I guess he wanted to surprise you."

"Well, he certainly did that. I saw him while I was out jogging this morning. At first I thought I was seeing things. He was the last person I expected to run into."

Cheryl nodded. "Carl is the one who told me. They ran into each other yesterday at Milner's Grocery."

Kendra took another sip of her tea. "Well, just about everyone has made a point of telling me today just in case I didn't know. I had at least four drop-ins at the shop this morning, people who suddenly needed their eyes tested, bearing news that Slate was back in town."

Cheryl chuckled. "People were counting on a wedding between you two. Your and Slate's love life held everyone's interest back then."

Kendra shook her head, remembering. "And if you ask me they're too interested in it now, although Slate and I don't have a love life."

"Did he say why he came back after all this time?"

Kendra sighed deeply as she spread more dressing on her salad. "He claims he wants my forgiveness for the way he left."

"Will you forgive him?"

Kendra picked up her fork. "Cheryl, I understood why he left, so there's no forgiveness needed for that. What I couldn't accept then and still can't accept now is the fact that not once did he call me in seven years."

Cheryl nodded. "He talked to Carl, and from what Carl said Slate had a rough time dealing with Susan Conrad's death all those years."

Kendra shook her head. "But still, he could have called or something. I think I deserved that much since he claimed to have loved me."

Cheryl met Kendra's gaze. "Have you given thought to what his return could mean?"

Kendra raised an eyebrow. "And just what do you think it could mean?"

"The two of you burying the past and getting on with your lives."

Chapter Eight

"I understand that Landis boy is back in town."

Kendra couldn't help but smile as she adjusted the ophthalmic equipment to put it in place. The person she had seen on the beach that morning was definitely not a boy. No boy had a body quite like that.

"Yes, Ms. Martha, that's what I hear, too."

"You haven't seen him yet?"

Kendra decided to tell the truth. In this town a lie could come back to haunt you. "Yes, ma'am. I ran into him this morning while jogging."

"And?"

Kendra shook her head. At eighty years old the woman was still sharp as a tack and still kept her mind in everyone's business. "And it was good seeing him again."

Martha Bolden frowned. "That's all you have to say, young lady?"

Kendra adjusted the lighting overhead to have a clear view of Mrs. Bolden's shrewd eyes. "Yes, ma'am, other than to say your eyesight looks just as good as it did last week when you came in for your annual eye exam."

The older woman had the decency to smile. "Well, at my age you can't be too careful when it comes to your sight."

Yeah, especially if you think you need to start seeing something, Kendra thought as she shut down her equipment. She glanced over at the clock. She had an hour left before closing time.

After Martha Bolden left, Kendra went back into her office to make notations in several of her patients' charts. Unless she had another walk-in she was through for the day.

She couldn't help but remember her conversation with Cheryl at lunch and the comment her friend had made about her and Slate getting back together. At the moment she was trying not to feel anything for him, although her mouth was still tingling from the effects of his kiss. She leaned back in her chair and remembered how Slate had kissed her as though there had not been seven years of separation between them, and how easily her body had responded.

The tinkling sound of the bell over the front door rang out through the office and caught her attention. The young woman she'd hired over a year ago as her assistant had left after Kendra's last scheduled patient. Walking out of her office, Kendra stopped dead in her tracks when she saw who her unscheduled patient was.

Slate Landis.

She swallowed as their eyes met. He stood in front of her display window and, from the ray of sunshine that illuminated his features, as well as his physique, to the tank top and cut-off jean shorts he wore, he looked totally stunning.

An awkward silence hung over the room while she tried to regain her composure. She cleared her throat. "Slate, what are you doing here?"

He stepped away from the window and gave her a warm, cheerful smile. "I'm here for an eye exam."

Chapter Nine

Kendra's face tilted into a frown. Not for one minute did she believe Slate needed his eyes examined, especially considering the way those eyes had checked her out this morning and were doing likewise now. She leveled her gaze on him. "And when was the last time you had an eye exam?"

He shrugged. "I can't rightly recall at the moment. Probably not since the last time your father gave me one."

Kendra sighed. "All right then, follow me."

He gave her a huge smile. "Sure thing."

When they reached her office she closed the door behind them. "Please sit in that chair while I locate your chart. Do you know if glaucoma ran in your family?" When he sat down Kendra couldn't help but notice how well his solid frame fit the sturdy chair.

"As far as I know, it didn't."

She nodded as she pulled his chart out of the cabinet. "All right, but I think I'll give you a glaucoma test as well."

"Whatever you think is best."

She raised an eyebrow. What she didn't think was best at the moment was the two of them alone in her office. "Just sit back and relax for a moment while I get the equipment in place."

"All right."

Kendra leaned close to him to bring the slit lamp near his face. Her head began swimming when she took a sniff of his aftershave. It was such a masculine fragrance. Already her body was responding to his smell, his proximity.

"Rest your chin here and please read the line farthest to the bottom that you can."

"All right. I believe I can read the letters on the very last line."

"Okay then go for it, left to right."

"Well now, there's an E for ecstasy, an S for sex, a P for passion, an O for org —"

"Just saying the letter will do."

"If you prefer."

"I do."

Okay. The remaining letters are T and F." He smiled. "I had good words lined up for them."

She shook her head grinning. "Yes, I bet you did." She pulled the optical machine away from his face and jotted some notes in his chart.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

She thought that if she didn't get him out of her office and soon, she would lose her ability to think, at least rationally. She was trying to remain professional but he was making it downright difficult.

"I'll let you know after your glaucoma screening," she said, setting up the tonometer.

The procedure was over in a few minutes. "You have twenty-twenty vision which is surprising considering the type of work you do. You evidently monitor the amount of time you spend in front of your computer screen, which is a very smart thing to do."

He nodded then stood. "Is the exam over?"

"Yes."

"Am I your last patient for today?"

She raised an eyebrow before answering. "Yes, why?"

"Because of this."

And for the second time that day she found herself being pulled into his arms.

Chapter Ten

For the second time that day she didn't resist him. With a smooth precision he had pulled her into his arms and took her mouth with the ease and experience of a man who knew what he wanted and what it took to get it.

Kendra was helpless to do anything but follow his lead, especially when her body was rejoicing at being held so tight to a man it had an affinity with, and when she felt his firm and hard erection touch her belly she opened her mouth fully under his.

He thoroughly explored her mouth with his tongue, making her weak with desire and her body consumed with need. She felt his hands touch her backside, bringing her even closer to him and began giving him bold strokes of her own.

Passion, the likes of which she hadn't felt in over seven years, took over, sending her mind reeling and her body burning. His kiss was filling an empty space that had been hollow since he'd left. And now her body was telling just what it wanted and whom it wanted it from. When one of his hands left her bottom to cup her breast, teasing the tip with his thumb, she moaned deep within her throat. She remembered the first time he had touched her this way and how the feel of his hands on her breasts had heightened every nerve in her body — just like it was doing now.

The blasting sound from a car horn drew them apart and for endless moments they just stared at each other, trying to get their breathing under control.

Finally, Kendra spoke. "You can't just go around kissing me whenever you feel like it, Slate."

To prove he disagreed, he leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose and instinctively her body moved closer to his. "I can't?"

"No, you can't," she whispered softly, yet at the same time tilting her mouth up to his for another kiss.

He greedily obliged her and she shivered from the onslaught of his mouth again. Reaching out she captured the hard muscles of his shoulders beneath her fingers and reveled in the feel of his mouth working magic on hers. She had to be stronger the next time, her mind reasoned, but right now she needed this. She wanted this. A part of her had forgotten the pleasure a woman could find in a man's arms. Especially when those arms belonged to Slate Landis.

Moments later, he slowly pulled back his mouth and met her gaze. "Have dinner with me tonight, Kendra," he said in a low, husky voice.

It was on the tip of Kendra's tongue to deny his request. She suddenly felt the need to get herself together before she did anything else with him she may be sorry for later. But when he began placing butterfly kisses around her mouth, she lost the fight to resist.

"Yes, I'll have dinner with you."

Chapter Eleven

"If you're so against going out with Slate tonight, Kendra, then why did you agree to do it?"

Kendra turned away from her mirror, met Cheryl's gaze, and frowned when she thought about the kisses she and Slate had shared earlier that day in her office. "Let's just say he caught me at a weak moment."

Cheryl chuckled. "Yeah, I can just imagine how he did it, too, since I know just how ripe you are for the picking."

Kendra placed her hands on her hips. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. As your best friend I know what you've been getting and what you haven't been getting, and the one thing you haven't gotten in over seven years is laid." Cheryl arched a dark, slanted eyebrow. "Unless you've been holding back and not telling me everything."

Kendra's frown deepened. "I've told you everything you needed to know. And you're right, there hasn't been anyone since Slate, which is why I'm so tense about our date tonight." She dropped down on her bed. "I want him pretty damn bad."

"Then get him. Seven years is a long time to be deprived."

A groan rumbled deep within Kendra's throat. "Yeah, tell me about it. But I can't let Slate think he can waltz back into town after all this time and pick up where he left off."

"And I agree, but what's wrong with letting him see firsthand what he's been missing all those years. I say you should fight fire with fire. Turn the tables on Slate and have him at your mercy for the next week."

Kendra leaned back on the palms of her hands, tipped her head, and met Cheryl's gaze. "Are you suggesting that I engage in an affair with him?"

Cheryl grinned. "Yes, an affair of the most passionate kind, and when the week is over just walk away. It's a fantastic idea unless..."

Kendra frowned. "Unless what?"

Cheryl regarded her speculatively. "Unless you're afraid that you won't be able to walk away because a part of you still loves him."

Cheryl's words struck deep, and Kendra swallowed as she felt a tight knot in her throat. "I'm not in love with Slate."

"Then you don't have a thing to worry about, but as your best friend I suggest that you make certain of your feelings. You and Slate had a very special relationship and although you haven't mentioned him much over the years, I'd always felt the reason you never allowed yourself to get involved with another man was because you still loved him."

Kendra lifted her chin. "If you thought that then you were wrong."

Cheryl nodded. "If you're sure of that then there's nothing for you to worry about. You'll get the sexual fulfillment you need and still walk away with your heart intact."

Kendra liked the thought of that and the corners of her mouth tilted into a beguiling smile. "I can handle that. Let the fun begin."

Chapter Twelve

Slate knew he was in deep trouble the moment Kendra opened her door. His gaze took in the outfit she'd chosen to wear. It was a black, clingy number that flaunted everything it concealed. The way the dress fit her body reminded him of just how enticing all of her body parts were, covered or uncovered. The dress ended way above her knees with slits on both sides showing long, gorgeous legs. He swallowed deeply. There was no doubt that tonight would be one he'd remember for a long time.

"Come in, Slate. I just need to grab my purse," Kendra said, reminding him that he was there for some reason other than to stand in her doorway and ogle her.

"Yeah, sure," he said, stepping inside then watching as she disappeared into the back. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his hand. Things were heating up already. He glanced up when she reentered the room.

"I'm ready," she said, placing the strap of her purse on her shoulder. "And you never did say where we were going."

He gazed into her dark eyes and responded. "I thought it would be nice if we drove to Jacksonville. I heard there's a nice seafood restaurant on the Intercoastals Waterway there. And I know how much you like seafood."

Kendra's smile widened. She was glad he'd decided not to take her to any place locally. The town was already buzzing about them.

"Sounds great, but first I think we should get this out of the way," she said taking a step closer and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Since our day started out this way we may as well stay on a roll, don't you think?" she whispered silkily before joining her mouth to his.

She wanted to show him that he could get just as good as he gave. Closing her eyes, she settled her body against his, immediately feeling him get hard against her. When he opened his mouth beneath hers she slipped her tongue inside and decided to play "catch me if you can."

He caught her, snarling her tongue with his and feasting on her mouth like a starving man. The more he feasted, the more her body began overflowing in desire so thick she could almost smother in it. When he reached down and touched her hips to bring her more snugly against him, slanting his mouth across hers in the process, she decided to pull back before they ended up making love on her living room floor. And that was not how she intended their evening to end.

At least not yet. She planned to torture him for a while longer.

Fighting the heat erupting in her stomach, Kendra licked her lips as if relishing in the taste of him. Tilting her head up, she smiled brightly. "All right then, I'm ready to go."

Incapable of speech, Slate could only nod and follow her out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

The woman was trying to torment him, Slate concluded as they finished off the last of their meal. After a steamy kiss began their evening, things had gotten even hotter on the thirty-minute drive to the restaurant. Kendra had sat in the car with her legs crossed in a way that blatantly showed the slit in her dress. He could barely keep his eyes on the road.

Then when their meal had been delivered, she had turned eating snow crabs into the most erotic sight he'd ever seen when she had taken her tongue and practically sucked and licked the claws dry. The motions she had made with her mouth while eating the crabs had him shifting in his seat. He could just imagine the things that she could do with that mouth, which was something they'd never got around to doing when they had dated years back.

"Do you think you're going to want dessert?"

Her question grabbed his attention and their gazes met and held across the table. Yes, he wanted dessert, but what he had a sweet tooth for was definitely not on the menu.

He took several deep breaths before answering. "No, I think I'll pass, but you can order something if you'd like."

She smiled. "Thanks. I see on the menu that they have ice cream cones. I think I'll order one since I feel like licking something tonight."

His erection suddenly strained against his zipper with such brutal force that he nearly gasped in pain. "Then by all means order one," he said huskily, surprised that he was capable of speech.

Her smile widened. "I think I will."

Slate thought that in all his twenty-nine years he had never seen anyone lick an ice cream cone like she did. Sitting across from her and watching her tongue at work was enough to tempt him to have more than one glass of wine, but since he was the one doing the driving he just sat there and let her torture him. Besides, he had a feeling he needed all his faculties to handle the rest of the evening with Kendra, and couldn't help wondering how she intended it to end.

After he'd taken care of their check, he stood. "Ready to leave?"

"Yes."

He nodded. He would find out soon enough.

When she stood, intense longing flared through him as he took a look at her dress, and seeing what he could of her dark creamy flesh was enough to make him lose control. "Have I told you how good you look tonight?"

Even her chuckle turned him on. "Yes, four times tonight. Thanks. And you know what they say, don't you?"

He raised a curious dark brow. "No, what do they say?"

"They say that flattery will get you everywhere."

He tilted his lips in a smile when he thought of all the possibilities. "Everywhere?"

Chapter Fourteen

"Ahh," Kendra moaned throatily. "Move just a little lower. Ahh, now move just a little more to the right; do it harder. Yes, oh yes, that's it, harder still. Umm, that feels so much better."

After one last moan she looked over her shoulder and said. "Thanks for scratching my back, Slate. You can zip me back up now."

Slate's hand trembled as he slowly zipped up Kendra's dress. When he had pulled into her driveway she had suddenly begun twitching in her seat saying her back needed scratching. He had been more than happy to oblige until his fingers had come into contact with her bare skin. The first thing he'd noted was the absence of a bra. The next thing had been how warm and smooth her skin was.

His hand had glided over the spot she'd indicated needed scratching. The throaty sounds she'd made when he'd finally found the spot had sent shivers of excitement racing down his spine. If she made those kinds of sounds from having her body scratched, he didn't want to imagine what type of sounds she would make when they made love.

"Are you sure your back feels better?" he asked once he had zipped her dress completely up.

She turned around in her seat. "Yes, I'm sure." She smiled and gave him a thoughtful look. "I'd almost forgotten what great hands you have."

Blood raced through his body at an alarming speed with the memories that suddenly came to mind. "I'm glad I was able to help you to remember," he said as his fingers absently stroked the steering wheel. "We shared some wonderful times together back then, didn't we?"

Kendra rested her head against the back of her seat as memories filled her mind. "Yes, we did. I couldn't wait to hear Dad start snoring each night so I could sneak out. I'll never forget how we used to meet on the beach under the beautiful night sky and talk for hours."

Slate nodded. Talking wasn't the only thing they did on those nights. To keep what they did private, he would drive into Jacksonville each week for his condom purchases to make sure he always had plenty on hand.

"Well, it's getting late and I'd better go inside," Kendra said softly, breaking into his thoughts. She tipped her head and looked over at him. "Thanks for such a wonderful evening."

He swallowed deeply and shifted in his seat wondering if she really intended to send him home with a hard-on. Her next words let him know that she did.

"I hope you sleep well tonight, Slate."

He tried to downplay his disappointment and cast a grin over at her. "Yeah, I hope so, too."

She placed a warm hand on his thigh, pretty close to a part of him that was aching. "I'd like to invite you over to dinner tomorrow night at seven. Think you can make it?"

The look in her eyes indicated she had more than dinner on her mind, and he didn't hesitate in responding. "Yeah, I can make it."

Chapter Fifteen

Three hours later and Slate was still awake. How on earth could he sleep when thoughts of Kendra filled his mind? Although they had enjoyed a nice conversation at dinner, they hadn't discussed the things he wanted to talk to her about. It seemed she had intentionally steered clear of any discussion about the past. Instead they had talked about mutual friends and what was happening with local politics.

He wanted to tell her how his emotions had been shattered after Susan Conrad's drowning, and that he hadn't wanted her to see him that way. He had stayed out of college the following year just to keep his sanity and when he had gone back, things had been rough.

He wanted her to know that his love for her was the only thing that had kept him sane during that time, and that after seeking counseling and therapy he finally felt normal again and wanted to seek her out, but had thought because of the time that had lapsed, he no longer deserved her love. He'd believed that he would be doing the right thing by giving her up so she could find love and happiness with someone else.

Finally he'd broken down and contacted Marcie Wilkins, and the older woman had convinced him that regardless of what he thought, Kendra did need him and he needed her. Ms. Marcie had told him of Kendra's father's death and how she had accepted a future of being an old maid by not dating any of the eligible bachelors in town.

Talking to Ms. Marcie had made him realize just how much he still loved Kendra. He knew now he would not be completely happy until she was a part of his future. Oh, yeah, he wanted her in his bed, too — but more importantly, he wanted her in his life.

He got out of bed and decided since he couldn't sleep and it was such a beautiful night, he may as well take a walk on the beach.

Half a mile away Kendra couldn't sleep either. She stood outside on her porch thinking that she had laid it on rather thick tonight with Slate and had made the mistake of spreading some on herself in the process.

Her body was hot and there was nothing she could do to get cool. She had practically stripped down to the bare essentials yet she was burning up. She hadn't dared let Slate kiss her good-night. After he had accepted her invitation to dinner, she had opened the car door and raced into the house without looking back.

Thinking about him only made Kendra's body feel hotter. Knowing she was in a state where she would not find relief tonight, she walked back into the house and went into her bedroom. Taking off her robe she quickly slipped into her bikini.

It was a wonderful night to go swimming and she decided to go to her favorite part of the beach — the stretch of sand in front of the beach house.

Chapter Sixteen

The night air was cool and Kendra tightened the robe at her waist as she walked along the shoreline. The moon's glow seemed endless and bathed the beach waters in a sparkling hue.

She drew in a calming breath and inhaled the scent of the ocean. A number of stars sparkled overhead like dots of diamonds in a dark velvety sky. A few minutes later she had almost reached her destination, when suddenly she made out a figure not far from where she stood. The reflection from the moon provided enough light for her to see the person who was standing less than twenty feet away, staring out at the ocean.

She gathered her towel against her chest when a voice inside her head told her to turn around and go back. Slate was the last person she needed to see, but she couldn't advance nor retreat. She just stood there transfixed and watched him, knowing he was unaware of her presence.

The shimmering light cast his features into sharp view, and she thought that she had never seen a more beautiful specimen of a man. The only piece of clothing he wore was swim shorts and the rich brown coloring of his skin seemed to glow. His bare chest, masculine shoulders, and firm thighs displayed a physically fit body, one that was capable of giving a woman intense pleasure. She shuddered, remembering just what kind of pleasure it could deliver.

Heated desire thrummed through her already hot veins as her body responded to the sheer essence of him, making it plainly clear whom it wanted and what it needed.

The seven year wait was over.

She inhaled deeply and the sound seemed to alert Slate to her presence. He turned, and his gaze caught hers and held it. Heat flowed from his eyes to her and the desire in his eyes communicated to her, making every nerve in her body move between her legs. She shuddered against the sexual power he held over her from just looking at her and was tempted to close her eyes to shut him out, but couldn't.

His gaze said it all. He wanted her.

Kendra took a step forward, knowing that she wanted him, too. She bit her lip, remembering how things used to be between them, the heat and the intensity. At seventeen and eighteen, she'd had the desires of a young girl; now her body had the hunger of a woman.

She watched Slate take the remaining steps toward her, holding her gaze all the while. The expression on his face was intense, and for a moment she could only imagine what thoughts were flitting through his mind. Then suddenly, she read a few of them and her breath caught and her nipples hardened. He planned on doing a lot to her tonight; seven years' worth and no matter how he tried, he still wouldn't get enough.

But then, she thought when he finally came to a stop in front of her, neither would she.

Chapter Seventeen

As much as Slate wanted to pick Kendra up in his arms and carry her to the beach house and devour her, he didn't do it. There was a reason the two of them had met out here under the stars and facing the ocean.

For seven years he had grown to hate the sea because of what it had taken away from the Conrads and away from him. Now with Kendra's help, the last phase of deep-rooted guilt was being destroyed. From now on whenever he thought of the sea, it wouldn't be as a taker of life but as a giver. In Kendra's arms tonight, in front of the rolling surf of the ocean on its mystic shores, he planned to get his life back.

Without saying a single word, he leaned down and kissed each corner of her mouth before hungrily staking his claim and slanting his mouth over hers. He could feel her breathing quicken and the heat that flooded her mouth when he felt her body shudder. He felt it vibrate through every cell, every pulse, every pore.

Slate's tongue was in control, and Kendra's went where his led, seeking, devouring, eating away at her with a hunger that made her knees weaken and her heart race. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the hardness of him, large and physical. His fingers slipped beneath the straps of her bikini top and pulled it down off her shoulders, and his mouth began devouring her breasts.

He was renewing his brand, staking a claim, reaffirming what had always been. His mouth moved back to hers, demanding her response as it greedily robbed her of any conscious thought other than how he was making her feel. And she matched him, passion for passion.

His hand moved to her hips and grasped her bikini bottom, and after one firm tug on the flimsy material it ripped. She broke the kiss, panting profusely. Her decision made, she took a step back and eased what was left of the bikini bottom down her legs and kicked it aside. She then pulled the bikini top over her head and tossed it away.

Naked, she went back into Slate's arms. "I want you," she whispered softly.

His mouth captured hers and he picked her up into his arms and walked her to the area where he had spread a towel earlier. He placed her down on it, then proceeded to remove his swim shorts.

He heard her breath catch when he stood before her, gloriously naked and aroused. He had wanted to talk to her and explain everything before things reached this stage. He had wanted to tell her what had gone on in his life over the past seven years and why he had stayed out of touch.

Out of touch but not out of mind. He had loved her and had never stopped loving her. Loving her was what had kept him sane when he'd felt himself about to go off the deep end.

His entire body was tensed, wired, filled with desire. And when she reached out her arms to him, he dropped down beside her on the towel, aroused and ravenous beyond reason.

Chapter Eighteen

Passion grew to extreme proportions when Slate's fingers touched Kendra, skimming all over her body, noticing the differences the years had made. This was no longer the body of a young girl still coming into bloom, but was as a flower fully opened. The curves, fullness, and lushness he found absolutely extraordinary as he stroked her everywhere, beginning with her breasts before moving lower between her legs.

There his hand found the treasure he sought. She was hot to his fingers, exceedingly wet, and the scent of her consumed him. He began stroking her while whispering just what he wanted to do to her.

When neither of them could take any more, he knelt before her, driven to taste her all over. He began spreading kisses all over her body, paying special homage to her breasts, flicking his tongue over the swollen nipples. And when he heard her soft, throaty breath catch, he was determined to go someplace where he'd never gone before with her.

Holding her hips firmly in his hand he lowered his mouth past her navel and felt her body clench in surprise, then heard the sounds of shocked pleasure that erupted from deep in her throat when his tongue delved into the very essence of her, loving it, cherishing it.

"Slate!"

His name was a scream of gratification when his tongue began stroking her in a way it had never done before. Taking his hand he gently widened her legs, determined to get everything he wanted. With the heat of his mouth he showed her in a way he had never shown another woman just what she meant to him — what she'd always meant to him.

She screamed his name over and over as her nails clawed his back, and when he felt her body tense with her climax, he swiftly moved in place over her.

Their gazes met the moment his body entered hers as his hand grabbed her hips and lifted her to go deeper.

"Ahh." He released a long sigh and a deep shuddering breath when her inner muscles tightened around him, clenching his throbbing erection, holding it captive inside of her. For a second he couldn't move; he just remained still in that position, savoring the feel of being inside of her, connected to her, one with her.

"Love me, Slate."

Her words broke him, destroyed the very last vestige of his control and restraint, opening a floodgate of desire. He began moving and the strokes increased. His thrusts became extensive when a need long denied ripped through him. His mind began spinning out of control. His body followed, and when he felt

her body let go as an orgasm shook her to the core, he screamed her name and pushed deeper inside of her as an orgasm tore through him as well, making him explode inside of her.

Lowering his head, he consumed her lips, her mouth, and her tongue. She was back in his arms, and he was back inside her body, and there was no way he could ever let her go.

Chapter Nineteen

Too weak to move, Kendra lay in Slate's arms, enjoying the feel of being there. When he shifted his body to stare down at her, she felt the intensity in his gaze. He leaned forward and captured her lips and she gloried in what they had shared, but knew what was still between them — the doubts, regrets, and the anger. It was time they got everything out in the open.

When he finally broke the kiss, emotions she'd tried holding at bay came tearing through, bringing with them pain. "Why?" she asked softly.

Slate knew what she was asking him. "I went through hell, Kendra, and couldn't let you see me that way. Not being able to save Susan Conrad almost destroyed me. It didn't matter that everyone thought I had done all I could do. I was convinced that I had not done enough and was a failure."

Kendra had understood the demons that had made him leave Fernandina Beach that morning after the incident, but what she could not understand, nor accept, was that he hadn't tried contacting her.

"Why didn't you try contacting me over the years, Slate? If only to let me know you were all right. Didn't you think I deserved that much?" she asked softly, remembering all the emotions she had endured during that time.

He ran a finger along her eyelids and saw the tears lodged there. His throat tightened. "I literally lost my mind after that, Kendra. I didn't go back to school that year. Guilt consumed me, and I was eaten up with it. I finally pulled myself together to finish my last year of college but things didn't get better. Every night when I went to bed I saw Susan's face and how it had looked that day. I saw the look in her eyes, her hope that I would save her. I began drinking heavily and one night was involved in a car accident. Luckily, no one was hurt. Since I didn't have a prior record, the judge sentenced me to a full year of community service at a hospital. That's when I started getting my life back. I met people who had endured more than I had and were fighting not only to get their lives back but to retain what life they had.

I made up my mind to get myself together and that's when I sought counseling and underwent therapy for two solid years before I felt worthy enough of peaceful sleep. I also started my company but soon discovered I still wasn't happy; there was something missing from my life. It was something I desired more than life itself, something that I had tried to give up. You. That's when I decided to come here and explain why I didn't stay in touch and to tell you how guilt had made me feel unworthy of your love."

Kendra sighed. She had never imagined that Slate had been that consumed by guilt. Over the past seven years she had been hurting, but he had been hurting even more.

Reaching out she pulled him into her arms. "Let's go to the beach house, Slate," she whispered softly. She intended to prove to him that he was worthy of everything, especially of her.

Chapter Twenty

After taking a shower together to wash the beach sand from their bodies, Slate and Kendra got into bed and made love again. This time she showed him just what he meant to her and just how lonely her life had been without him those seven years.

Slate leaned over in bed and tenderly cupped Kendra's cheek in his hand. "There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about you, even those days when I didn't feel I was worthy enough. I couldn't stop loving you because you were such a part of me, a part I knew that I'd have with me no matter what. For the past couple of years, I poured everything into my work and tried to get my life back right so when I did return I could have something to offer you."

A smile touched the corners of Kendra's lips. "And what do you have to offer me, Slate?" she asked teasingly, although the look in his eyes was serious.

"I want to offer you my love. I want you to be my wife, my best friend, and my lover. I won't ask you to leave here since I know how much this town means to you. In my line of business I can set up shop anywhere. I want to recapture that dream we first had of being together forever." He pulled her closer into his arms. "I love you. Say you'll marry me, Kendra. Please say it."

A sense of overwhelming happiness brought tears to Kendra's eyes. She loved him, too, and had never stopped loving him even when she thought he no longer loved her. "Yes, Slate, I'll marry you. I never stopped loving you and now that you're back, we have a lot of catching up to do. Seven years' worth." She reached up and caught the back of his head in her hand and pulled his mouth down to meet hers.

He groaned when their mouths made contact, and his arms automatically closed around her. Heat poured through every part of him as he gladly took what she offered.

Moments later, he drew back and broke off the kiss, dragging in a deep breath. He felt his erection get heavy and the need to be inside of her. "Look at me," he whispered huskily. "I want you to see just how you make me feel when I'm making love to you."

She gazed up at him when he placed his body over hers. His features revealed the intensity of how he felt when he was inside of her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled.

"There's nothing like a lover's touch," she said breathlessly, when he began moving inside of her, setting a rhythm and igniting their passion once again.

And as he made love to her, he knew that her love and her touch were all he would ever need.

The End