

SEXUAL HEALING

NOTE – this is the sequel to **Night Heat**, Steel Family Series novel- # 2. It is suggested that you read **Night Heat** prior to reading this short sequel.

1

“Are you okay?” Leah Mason glanced up at the man walking beside her and a faint smile touched her lips.

“Yes, Reese, I’m okay.” She sighed inwardly. No matter how many times he asked her that, her answer would always be the same. But deep down she knew it was a lie. What could be okay about a twenty - three - year - old woman who couldn’t let the man she loved touch her — at least anything beyond a kiss?

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

They had reached the front door to his home, and she stopped and turned to him. “Yes, I did.” That was not entirely true, either. They had been visiting his family and because no one knew the full story of why she had mysteriously left Newton Grove five years before, breaking Reese’s heart, his family resented the fact he had started seeing her again. She knew they were worried that she would up and leave and break his heart a second time.

“When we get inside I want you to talk to me, baby.” He opened the door, and when they walked into the foyer, he reached out and took hold of her hand and led her to the living room. When they sat down on the sofa he turned to her, tightened his hold on her hand and said in a low tone, “Now tell me what’s up, Leah. And don’t deny something is bothering you because I can feel it.”

Leah sighed deeply. Not for the first time she wondered why she was blessed with having such a wonderful man in her life. He had always been so attuned to her every thought, want and hurt. And he had tried so hard to take the hurt away. It had been six months since he had learned the truth of what had happened to her that fateful night, what had driven her to flee from her family and the man she loved. Since then she and Reese had agreed to take things slowly, rebuilding their relationship one day at a time and giving her time to put behind her what Neil Grunthall had done. Reese had been patient, understanding and more supportive than any man had a right to be. But still, after all this time, she hadn’t been able to get beyond being a victim of rape.

He scooted closer beside her on the sofa, continued to hold her hand and looked deep into her eyes. They sat so close their thighs were touching and she began feeling butterflies go off in her stomach, the first sign of anxiety from a man being too close. Inwardly, she fought the feeling that tried to intensify and glanced down at their joined hands for strength.

She told herself that he wasn't an ordinary man. He was Reese, the man she had fallen in love with at seventeen, the man she had given her virginity to just months before her eighteenth birthday and the man she had planned to marry, and they'd have all the babies he wanted to give her. He was the also the man who had secretly built his house for her, to give to her as a wedding gift. She hadn't known about the house when she'd fled town. At the time it would not have mattered. All she'd been able to think of that night was her humiliation, shame, hurt and disgrace. Neil, who had seen Reese as his enemy, had raped Leah as a way not only to get back at Reese, but also at Leah's father for firing him.

She had felt that her father and Reese were the last two people she could have gone to with the truth. There was no doubt in her mind that they would have killed Neil with their bare hands, and she couldn't risk that. So she had run away without telling anyone what had happened. She hadn't even confided in her sister Jocelyn.

Jocelyn.

She smiled when she thought of the older sister she was finally getting closer to. Jocelyn was twenty-seven to her twenty-three. But even with the mere four-year difference in their ages, they had never been close. Jocelyn had always been "Daddy's" girl, while Leah had been "Mommy's" girl. Their mother had died when Leah had turned thirteen. That had been the worst period of her life. She had felt so alone. No one seemed to know how badly she was hurting and a part of her had been convinced that no one had cared. The only thing she had looked forward to was finishing school and leaving Newton Grove...at least that had been the only thing until Reese and his family had moved to town in her junior year of high school. He had been employed by her father's construction company. It was during that time that Reese became the focus of her life, her entire universe and the only one she held dear. And Neil had brutally destroyed all of that in one horrible night.

"Leah?"

2

She glanced up, met the intensity in Reese's dark eyes. She actually felt it. And she felt something else. Desire. She could feel his passion like a gentle caress to certain parts of her body and although she wanted to respond, a part of her mind would not let her. For some reason, she had a mental block that refused to let Reese tap into what was behind her fears. If only she was strong enough to let go, but she wasn't. Even after resuming counseling sessions with a therapist, she hadn't been able to move forward with that part of her life.

"I'm fine, Reese, really," she said at last. "But it hurts to know how your family feels about me now, when before we were so close. And it hurts even more to know their present feelings are justified."

"But they don't know everything, Leah. They don't know what happened to make you run away that night," he said softly, gently squeezing her hand.

"I know and I can't get upset with them for how they feel about me. I'm sure they're wondering why you're even seeing me again, spending so much time with me."

"What I do is my business, Leah, and my family knows that."

"Yes, but I still can't help but feel bad for them. They don't know the entire story. They're worried that I will hurt you again."

"But you won't. You promised you would stay in Newton Grove and not return to California, and that we would work things out, and we will."

She felt the tears coming and blinked a few times to keep them at bay. "Will we, Reese? It's been six months and although I'm comfortable with us kissing, I can't seem to get beyond that and that's not fair to you. I know you, Reese, just as you know me. You want me. You want to sleep with me and make love to me the way any man would want to with the woman he loves. But I just can't get beyond certain things."

"But you will. I truly believe that. We will continue to take things one day at a time, Leah, and no matter what anyone thinks or how long it takes, you and I are in this for the long haul. We're going to work through this. I truly believe that."

His words gave her some of the strength she needed. Because he believed, she wanted to believe. He was good at feeding her hope and she clung to him. His expectations for them, his belief in their future was what had kept her in Newton Grove when Jocelyn had moved to Charlotte a few months ago after getting married. There was no one here for Leah other than Reese. He was the reason she had remained here instead of returning to California where she had tried to start a new life. And he was the reason she had opened a café in town, right next door to his warehouse. It was there that he built his furniture.

Reese had a gift when it came to carpentry — connecting his hands to wood. Her father had left him money in his will. The small sum was enough for Reese to start up his own business. Leah had made a hefty sum from the sale of her share of the construction company her family had owned. Together, she and Reese had purchased this piece of real estate that had been perfect for both of their needs. It gave her the space she needed to start her restaurant, yet it was comforting to know Reese worked in the building right next door. They were now a twosome and did practically everything together. He usually got to the warehouse before she arrived at work, and each morning he would be her first customer before she officially opened.

They would sit and talk over coffee and pancakes before her two staff members arrived. And he always dropped in for lunch and then at the end of both of their work days — around three in the afternoon — he would come in and sit while she closed up for the day. Then they would either go to his place or hers for something to eat. Occasionally, they would dine somewhere in town. She could not ignore the cold stares she got from all the young women who just couldn't understand why the town's most eligible bachelor preferred hanging on to the woman who had broken his heart instead of moving on to someone else.

Leah sighed, deciding not to think about that any longer. She glanced around. Reese had built this house for her years ago, but when she had left town he'd felt hurt and betrayed. Eventually he'd sold it to Jocelyn. Jocelyn had sold it back to him when she'd gotten married to Sebastian Steele and moved away.

A part of Leah knew that the reason Reese had wanted the house back was because he was hoping that one day the two of them would live in it as man and wife and raise the family they'd always wanted. He had so many high hopes for them.

"So why did you bring me here tonight, Reese?" she couldn't help asking as she continued to glance around.

"I wanted you to see the changes I've made to the place, especially the basement. And I want your opinion about a few things I'm doing to the windows."

She nodded and smiled as she stood. "Okay, let me see what you've done."

3

A couple of hours later he had taken her home and they were strolling up the walkway to her door. He stood back while she unlocked the door. She knew she didn't have to ask him if he wanted to come inside for a minute because she knew he did. As always, he would kiss her good-night; it was the closest he was able to get to her.

"I really like the changes you made to your house, Reese," she said to break the still quietness of the night.

"It's our house, Leah. Always remember that," he said, unlocking the door for her. As soon as she closed the door behind him, he touched her hand and she turned to him. This was a part of their relationship they both looked forward to, the only physical part she felt comfortable with. She always knew that no matter how intense the kiss became, Reese would pull back before things got too out of hand. She admired his ability to stay in control. His control gave her the chance — even if only for a little while — to let go and indulge in at least one facet of her fantasies.

She gazed into his face thinking as she always did that at twenty-eight he was a handsome man. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark ebony eyes and skin the color of semi-sweet chocolate. She felt his hands move to her waist and instead of feeling panicky, she felt heat fill her insides.

"Good night, Leah." His voice was deep and husky.

"Good night, Reese." And the moment she said the words, he lowered his head and gently captured her mouth with his and she let go, sliding her own hands around his waist. She closed her eyes when their lips touched. The kiss reminded her of better times when she had been sexually free and uninhibited. Their tongues mingled, dueled, tangled. He made a sound deep within his throat. She heard it and was

totally aware he had gotten aroused. She could feel him pressed against her stomach. But she wasn't afraid of it because in the back of her mind a part of her needed this kiss from Reese as much she needed air to breathe. Slowly, he pulled away and she sensed things were getting too heated. She glanced up at him and he smiled. It was a slow, warm smile that touched her all over. Then he reached out and tilted her face up and leaned down and brushed a kiss across her lips one more time.

"Dream about me tonight, sweetheart."

She smiled. "I always do, Reese. I love you so much."

"And I love you, too, Leah." And then he was pulling her into his arms, holding her close and she felt it and knew he felt it, too. The need to assure each other of their feelings, their love and the knowledge that what others didn't understand, they did. What had happened that night five years ago was something they would deal with and work through. Together.

Moments later he took a step. "Don't forget that tomorrow I'm leaving for Memphis to pick up supplies. I won't be back until noon."

She nodded. She had forgotten. "Thanks for reminding me."

And then giving her one last caress across her lips, he turned and left. And as always, she felt an intense surge of loss with his leaving.

4

Leah glanced around her restaurant. It was small but just what she wanted and needed. Already, she and Reese had discussed the possibility of expanding and she was glad there would be no problem doing so. Since opening a few months ago for breakfast and lunch, she had begun getting a steady flow of customers. Because the buildings she and Reese had purchased were right off the interstate, truckers stopped by and she had discussed with Reese the possibility of expanding her hours to include dinner.

"Leah, you have a call."

She turned around and smiled over at Marie. A single mother who had recently moved to town, Marie had become a godsend. The hours at the restaurant afforded Marie time to get her two little boys to the bus stop in the morning and to be there to pick them up in the afternoon.

"Thanks, Marie, I'll take it in my office." Leah quickly walked in the back to her office, wondering if it was Jocelyn calling.

Although her sister had moved to Charlotte, they made a point of talking a few times a week. She was happy for Jocelyn. Her sister had found the man of her dreams and was happily married to one of the infamous Steele brothers, Sebastian. She smiled as she picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

“Leah, this is Daniel.”

Leah raised her brow wondering why Reese’s brother would be calling her. “Yes, Daniel, what is it?”

“It’s about Reese. He asked me to call you. He was involved in an accident on his way back to town and —”

“An accident!” Panic raced through Leah’s body. “What happened? Is he okay? Where is he?”

“Yes, he’s okay, just bruised up some. We’re at the hospital. Some trucker fell asleep at the wheel and plowed into him. I understand from the state troopers that things could have been much worse, especially if Reese hadn’t been familiar with the roads and hadn’t been able to retain control of his truck. Otherwise, there’s no way he would have been able to stop the vehicle from going over a cliff.” Leah closed her eyes, imagining such a thing happening when she remembered the mountainous roads between Newton Grove and Memphis with all those sharp curves.

She began shaking. “Where is he, Daniel? I need to come to him. I need to —”

“You really don’t need to do anything. The only reason I’m calling is because he asked me to.”

She paused, hearing the cold bitterness in Reese’s brother’s voice. At that moment, anger suddenly tore into her, but she wouldn’t give in to it. There was a lot about her and Reese’s relationship that Daniel didn’t know. “And I appreciate you calling, but I really need to know what hospital he was taken to.” She needed to see Reese, talk to him and make sure he was all right.

“There’s no need for you to come here. The doctor has fixed him up and has given me the okay to take him home and that’s what I’m doing. You can call and talk to him later. ‘Bye.’”

Leah heard the click in her ear and for the longest time just stood there and stared at the phone. If anyone thought she wasn’t going to find Reese and see for herself that he was all right then they had another think coming. She pulled the apron over her head as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. It would be closing time in an hour or so and Marie could do it for her. At the moment, the one and only thing on her mind was getting to Reese.

5

Leah pulled into Reese’s yard at the same time Daniel did, and she barely gave her car a chance to stop before she jumped out of it. As soon as Reese opened the door to Daniel’s truck to get out, she was there. And as if he understood, he pulled her into his arms and held her close to him. A part of her wanted to cry. She’d seen the scratches on his face, the cut on his forehead and the slightly bruised eye. She thanked God because things could have been a lot worse. She could have lost him.

She pulled back and placed her hands on his shoulders and studied his features. Even banged-up he was the most handsome man she knew. And because she needed to know that he was totally okay, she moved closer to him and, on tiptoe and ignoring his brother's presence, covered his mouth with hers. She gave a sigh of relief, then one of pleasure, when he began kissing her back, accepting the invasion of her tongue as he continued to kiss her and she kissed him, over and over.

In the distance, she heard Daniel clear his throat and she and Reese reluctantly parted. She glanced over and saw the frown that covered Daniel's face. "If the two of you don't mind, I have to get back to work. I'd like to get Reese settled before I go. The doctor gave him some pain pills and said for him to lie down and rest," he said.

She heard the underlying message in Daniel's words. He would take care of his brother and wanted her gone. But she had news for Daniel Singleton. She wasn't going anywhere. "You can go on back to work, Daniel. I'll handle things from here. I'll take care of Reese."

Daniel narrowed his eyes at her, and she knew he wanted to say something, probably something smart, but he decided to hold his tongue in front of Reese. She felt his anger. Daniel was only eighteen months younger than Reese and the two of them had always been close. He saw her as the woman who had hurt his brother deeply.

"I'll be okay, Danny. I need you to go and assure Mom that I'm all right. Let her know that Leah is here with me and that I'll be fine."

Leah could feel the tension between the two men and it nearly broke her heart to know she was the cause of it. Daniel stared at Reese for the longest time before finally nodding. Getting back into his truck he glanced through the window at them one last time before pulling off. Leah then turned her attention back to Reese. Taking his hand in hers, she said warmly, "Come on. Let's go inside so I can get you settled in bed."

6

Less than an hour later, Reese had showered, put on his pajamas, eaten the chicken noodle soup Leah had prepared, taken his medication and was out like a light. Leah thought that even asleep he looked sexy. She stood at the foot of the bed and smiled down at the man she loved with all her heart. She didn't want to think about what could have happened, but thanked God for what hadn't happened. She glanced down at herself, deciding she needed to take a shower, as well, but knew she didn't have any clothes to change into. She also knew she wouldn't be leaving Reese alone tonight so she made a quick decision. He had a drawer full of T-shirts; she would shower then slip into one and then wash and dry the clothes she was wearing for tomorrow. Knowing Reese would be sleeping for a while, she crossed the room and opened several drawers before locating the one where he kept his T-shirts nicely folded. She found one that advertised Singleton's Handcrafted Furniture that she knew would work. She checked on him one last time before leaving the room to use the shower in the guest room. A half hour later she had showered, put on Reese's T-shirt — it came to midhigh — and sat curled up in a chair by his bed, watching him as he continued to sleep. It was just turning dusk when she stood to stretch her

muscles and decided to give Jocelyn a call to let her know about Reese. Tiptoeing out of the room she went into the living room and picked up the phone. Moments later she heard her sister's voice on the line. "Hello?"

"Jocelyn? This is Leah."

Jocelyn knew something was wrong the moment she heard the strain in her sister's voice. "Leah? What's wrong?"

Hearing Jocelyn ask that question opened a flood gate of fears for Leah, fears of what she could have lost. In no time she was pouring out everything to her sister while trying to keep her voice composed. Near the end, she lost her battle not to cry and ended up sobbing. "What if he'd been killed, Jocelyn? What if I had lost him?"

"But you didn't," was her sister's calming words. "Reese is okay."

Despite Jocelyn's efforts to reassure her of that over and over, Leah's stomach still trembled at the thought of how he could have been taken away from her.

"Look, Leah, while Reese is sleeping, you should get some rest yourself. You're wound up pretty tight and you need to clear your mind of everything for a while."

Leah nodded, knowing Jocelyn was right. "Okay. I do need to rest my mind and thanks for listening. How are things going in Charlotte?"

For the next ten minutes Leah listened while Jocelyn told her how she had adjusted to being Sebastian's wife and what a loving family he had. His parents, brothers and cousins had accepted her with open arms and, although she missed everyone in Newton Grove, she loved her life with Bas living in Charlotte.

After ending the call Leah decided to telephone Reese's mother and brother to let them know he was doing okay. She hung up the phone minutes later thinking they actually seemed appreciative for the information she had provided to them. She then threw her jeans and top into the washing machine with plans to dry them later.

She noticed the time was seven o'clock as she made her way around the house, locking everything up for the night. As she passed through several rooms, the thought that Reese had built this house with his own hands and just for her made her chest swell with love for him. Jocelyn had finally told her how he had worked for their father's construction company in the day and then at night and on weekends he had built this home for her. At the time, she hadn't known of Reese's special gift because he had meant to surprise her with the home on their wedding day.

While she mused about the house, she decided to use the guest room that was closest to Reese's room. She wanted to be close enough to be able to hear him if he woke up in the night and called for her. As she settled down in the bed, she lay flat on her back and looked up at the ceiling. She willed herself to close her eyes for just a little while. For a moment, a really brief moment, she wanted to pretend that she and Reese were married and living in this house together, and that he was in the shower and in a few moments he would be joining her in the bed. That pleasant thought was on her mind when sleep finally overtook her a few moments later.

7

Reese heard the sound of a woman calling out to him in a panicked and frantic voice. Leah's voice. His eyes popped open and he forced them into focus. Then he heard the sound again.

"Reese! No! Don't go!"

Jumping up he glanced around the room, remembering where he was and why Leah was in his home. When he heard her cry out a third time he raced out of the room, following the sound. Had she had a nightmare? Was she reliving that night with Neil Grunthall?

He entered the guest room to find her thrashing about in the bed. Not wanting to frighten her, he knew he had to be careful how he approached her to pull her from the throes of the tortured sleep she was enduring. Wanting her to know it was him and not Neil, he began talking to her in a gentle voice. "Leah, it's Reese. You're okay, sweetheart. You're with me and you're okay."

He watched as her eyes flew open and she jerked upright in bed and glanced over at him. He saw the haunted look in her eyes and it almost broke his heart. He quickly moved to her, sat on the edge of the bed and gathered her into his arms. "It's okay, baby. It's okay."

"Reese," she said sobbing, wrapping her arms around his neck as if she would never let him go. "I thought I had lost you. I dreamed that I saw your truck go over the edge of that mountain. Oh, Reese, it was awful."

It then dawned on Reese that her nightmare had nothing to do with Neil but with him and what had happened to him earlier that day. He gently stroked her back and held her. "I'm fine, Leah. I'm safe and I'm here with you now."

"But I saw it," she said, still sobbing.

"It was only a bad dream, baby. I'm alive and here with you. Look at me."

She slowly released him to look at him. He saw the reddened eyes, the tear-strained cheeks and the quivering lips. He brushed a kiss across those lips and then said gently. "See. I'm here."

"But I could have lost you," she said in a low, trembling voice. "I could have lost you, Reese."

He heard the gut-wrenching torment in her voice and didn't know what to say; so instead he did what came instinctively. He pulled her closer into his arms and he kissed her. Passion such as he hadn't felt in a long time poured out of him as he put everything that was him into that kiss. Tonight, he felt connected to Leah in a way he hadn't felt in a long time...nearly five long years.

He tried remaining in control and fought the need coursing all through his body, but she was returning the kiss, stroke for stroke, mating her tongue with his as frantically and as desperately as he was mating his with hers. If being aroused could kill then he was a dead man, because he was aroused to the nth degree. His desire was potent; it felt vital to his survival, his mental and physical endurance.

He gave in when she pulled him down on the bed with her as they continued to kiss, and when she instinctively wrapped her body around his, that desperate need he'd felt earlier was clawing in him, taking everything he possessed to keep his control and sanity. And suddenly, when he felt Leah's hand on him, sliding up his thigh and then settling on his crotch, stroking his erection through the material of his pajama bottoms, he broke off the kiss and pulled back.

He knew she was not acting rationally and was reacting to the bad dream she'd had. The last thing he wanted to do was give in to his needs and take advantage of what she was going through. "No, Leah," he said, pulling her hand away from him. "We have to stop."

"No, Reese," she said, looking at him with tortured eyes. "We have to finish. I need to know you're okay in my own way. I need to know that I didn't lose you."

"But you didn't lose me, baby. I'm okay and —"

"No! I have to do this! Please, let me. Take your bottoms off for me. Please."

He heard the desperate plea in her voice and saw the tortured look in her eyes. He lifted his hips and removed his pajama bottoms and tossed them aside and before he could make a move to do anything else, she had pushed him back in the bed and was straddling him. He sucked in a deep breath, trying not to notice how the T-shirt she was wearing had ridden up nearly to her waist, giving him a delectable view of her nakedness, especially of her feminine mound.

He sucked in an even deeper breath when she took hold of his erection and began stroking it before shifting her body to bear down on him, lowering her own body to his. "Leah! Wait!"

She stubbornly shook her head, letting him know there was no waiting. She wanted to be a part of him now. She needed the connection. He needed the connection, as well, but willed his body to remain still and to let her have her way with him. He discovered moments later that remaining still wouldn't be easy when she eased all the way down on him, slowly, while staring deep into his eyes.

Her body was tight, and at one point it was like making love to a virgin all over again. But she refused to stop and as she continued to sink deeper, he felt her inner muscles clench him. "Leah!" He called her name when she began easing up and down on him, slowly at first and then in a faster rhythm.

She was tearing at his sanity, his hold of his senses and his control. The look he saw in her eyes was stunned, filled with a profound need, and the movements she made on top of him reflected that. When he saw that lying still was no longer an option, he nearly lifted his hips off the bed to thrust upward into her at the same time as she surged downward, riveting their bodies to the hilt. Each time they touched, her stomach, pelvis and thighs rubbing against his, a gnawing ache that had been within him since the last time they'd made love almost five years ago was being soothed. And when she increased her pace, pistoning her downward and upward strokes to a degree that was as intense as it could get, his hips continued to surge up, making each thrust that much deeper, more meaningful, unforgettable. Reese closed his eyes when he heard her scream out his name, and he drove himself deep inside her as he locked his legs around her. He might have hell to pay later, but he needed this. He needed her.

A coil of need tightened inside him and then snapped when his own climax exploded in a ball of gigantic sensations that ripped through every part of his body. He screamed out her name, and at the same time

he felt all the love any one man could have for a single woman emanating from deep within him. Emotions he'd held back for almost five years tore from him.

"Reese." His name was whispered from Leah's lips in a hoarse, enervated breath before her exhausted body collapsed on top of him.

8

Reese shifted his body in bed and pulled the covers over his head as his dreams got more intense. He had dreamed that he and Leah had made love several times and she had been in control by taking the on-top position. His body felt hard at the thought, and in sleep he grabbed the extra pillow in the bed and sank his face into it.

His eyes flew open when he inhaled the scent. Leah's scent. He jerked up in bed and glanced around, suddenly realizing it hadn't been a dream. He and Leah had actually made love in this very bed. And now she was gone. Hell!

Jumping out of bed he slipped into his pajama bottoms, wondering where to search for Leah first. He could imagine the setback what they'd done would cause. He had to find her, apologize for losing control and —

"Going to a fire, Reese?"

He jerked around. She was standing in the doorway holding folded laundry in her hands. And she looked...at peace. He blinked. It might have been his mind playing games on him, so he had to be sure. He inhaled deeply as he slowly walked over to her, not really knowing what to expect when he got close. He came to a stop in front of her and searched her face before asking softly. "You okay, baby?"

She nodded as a small smile touched her lips. "Yes, Reese, I'm fine. I had washed my clothes earlier and thought I would dry them while you were..."

"Forget about the clothes, Leah. How do you feel?" he asked with deep concern in his voice. She glanced down at the floor before lifting her head to meet his gaze again. Then to his surprise, the corners of her lips tilted into a smile. "Mainly sore."

For a quick moment he was startled by her words, and then he released a relieved sigh before taking a step closer to her. "You wanted it," he said in a low, husky voice, not taking his eyes off her as he remembered that they had made love several times.

He watched as her smile widened. "Yes, and if I recall correctly, I even took it. The nerve of me being so bold."

He grinned. "Yes, the nerve of you."

Then moments later the amusement vanished and was replaced with concern. "Other than being sore, how do you feel, Leah?"

This time it was Leah who took a step forward and in a surprising move she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Other than sore, I feel wonderful. Reborn. Rejuvenated. I feel like a woman who has been given her life back, Reese. I had to be shocked into it. The thought of losing you, not sharing my love for you in a physical way again, made anything Neil had done to me no longer central in my life. To me, what's important is moving ahead with you, sharing my love and my life with you, for better or worse. Good times or bad. I love you. I want to marry you. I want to have your babies. And," she said in a softer voice. "I want to get your family together and tell them the truth. I couldn't stand it if they opposed our marriage."

He took the clothes out of her hand and gathered her to him. "You don't have to tell them anything, Leah. All they need to know is that I love you."

"But I want to tell them. I have to. Your mother and brother deserve to know the truth. And I want them to know what a wonderful man you are to have stuck by me for these six months, to have gotten me through some pretty difficult times. You are truly a special man, Reese Singleton."

And then she was on tiptoe kissing him with all the intensity of a woman in love. Reese swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. A quiver of love and happiness flowed through her because she knew that once again she would receive sexual healing in the purest form in the arms of the man she loved.

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later, Reese swept his wife of just a few hours into his arms to carry her over the threshold of the house they would share. The wedding had been private, with only family and close friends. That's the way they had wanted it. He placed Leah on her feet and closed the door behind them. She smiled up at him, looking beautiful, totally radiant in her light-blue pantsuit. She had been a beautiful bride. "Jocelyn looks happy, doesn't she?" Leah asked, smiling up at him. "Sebastian is good for her."

And then she took a step and wrapped her arms around his neck. "And you, Reese Singleton, are good for me. And I love you."

He pulled her tighter into his arms. "And I love you, too, Leah Mason Singleton."

She smiled, liking the sound of her new name. She looked into his eyes. "It might be too early even to think about something like this, but I want a baby. Your baby. If it's a boy I want to name him after you and if it's a girl, I want to name her after my mother. I felt her presence today, Reese. Hers and Dad's. They are happy for me. They are happy for us. And your mom and Danny are happy for us, as well."

And she truly believed they were. Since she had tearfully told them the truth, they had been so supportive of her and Reese. And every day she was building a better relationship with his family.

"I want a baby, too," Reese said, pulling her closer to him. "Are you happy?"

She smiled. "I'm very happy."

Leah glanced at her watch. They would drive to Memphis and spend the night, and the next morning they would fly to Hawaii to begin their honeymoon. "Do we have time?" she asked him grinning.

He knew what she was asking. Ever since that night they had made love again, it was as if they were making up for lost time. Her fears had been destroyed by his love. He swept her back into his arms. "Baby, for that we'll make time."

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he started for the bedroom. "There's a lot that can be said for sexual healing, don't you think?"

He looked down into her eyes. "Yes, but then what we share is a powerful force because no matter what, in the end true love will conquer all."

He leaned down and kissed her. Unhurriedly. They had the rest of their lives together. Forever.