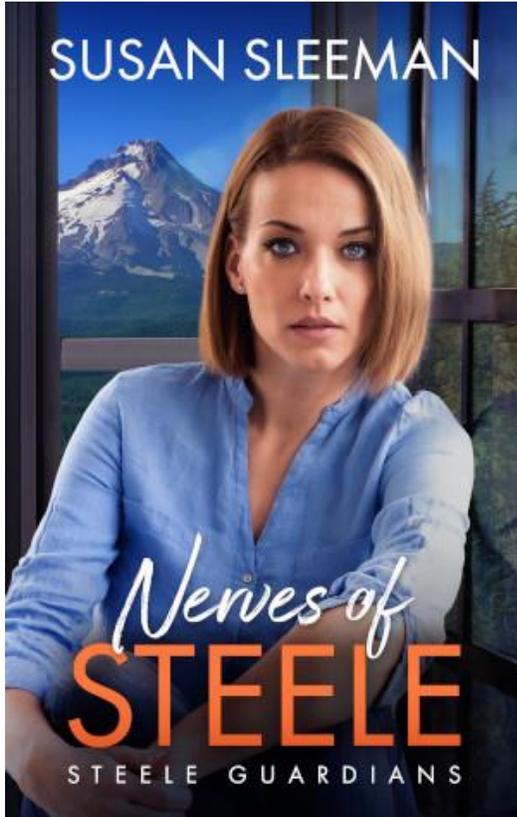


NERVES OF STEELE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

Steele Guardians Series – MAY/2022

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Searching for an abducted woman...

Detective Londyn Steel is thrown into the deep end when she's assigned to find an abducted socialite. Problem is, her family's company, Steele Guardians, was supposed to protect the family matriarch at her eightieth birthday party when she disappears, and Londyn fears her investigation will expose problems in her family's company and bring them down. Especially when County Detective Nate Ryder declares jurisdiction over the scene, and Londyn must take a back seat in one of the most important cases she's ever investigated.

Could put them in a deadly killer's crosshairs.

Londyn has no choice but to work with Nate and bristles at his interference at first, but soon forms a

working truce so they can combine forces to locate this missing woman before it's too late. As they search for leads, emotions he hasn't felt since before his service as a Navy SEAL come to the surface. He credits Londyn for unearthing the guy he used to be before his military service, and Londyn can barely fight her attraction for him. But when they fear the socialite was murdered and the killer is still hunting, seeking another prey, their feelings for each other have to be put on hold to stay alive.

Chapter One

Five minutes. Only five minutes stood between Peyton and sanity, and she didn't know if she would make it.

A bad feeling had soured her stomach all the way to the airport—each mile through

bustling traffic with her younger sister, Bristol, behind the wheel. Through the pair of them checking in at the ticket counter. Through the long meandering security line. Her stomach knotting. Growing tighter and tighter with each step, feeling like a clenched fist by the time they arrived at their gate.

Was her sick feeling God trying to tell her something about their flight to Arizona? Should she heed the warning and bail on their vacation flight or was something else going on?

Maybe she'd left something undone at work and it would come back to bite her. Not only bite her but her whole family. As the chief financial officer of the family business, Steele Guardians, if she failed to complete a necessary task, the whole family could suffer.

She couldn't fail them. Not in any way. That was her absolute worst fear.

The crackle of a malfunctioning fluorescent light above unnerved her even more, and she jumped to her feet. She took a step to pace. Could barely move. Fellow Oregonians tired of the near-daily rain and eager to get away for some sunshine, exactly like she and Bristol were doing, crowded the gate on a cloudy Monday morning in April.

Peyton had the trip planned for a month, and they were both desperate to see golden rays from the sky. Not just for a few brief sun breaks in the day or for an occasional sunny day, but for days on end. Glorious, warm your body and soul sun.

Bristol tugged on Peyton's jacket. "What's wrong with you?"

"I have a feeling. Something bad is happening or will happen, but I don't know what."

Bristol's eyes narrowed. "Are you worried about the flight?"

“Not really. It’s just”—Peyton shrugged—“I don’t know.”

Bristol patted the empty seat. “Sit and we can talk about it.”

Peyton couldn’t pace in the cramped space, so she plopped down on the chair, cold against her bare skin. She crossed her legs and jiggled her foot, her flip-flop threatening to fall off.

“If it’s not the flight it has to be work,” Bristol said. “You don’t have much of a life outside it.”

Peyton eyed her sister. “Look who’s talking. You’ve been working so many overtime hours lately, you must be the superstar deputy of the month.”

“I can’t deny it.” Bristol wrinkled her nose. “I’m glad we’re going away. I need the time off and the time to think.”

“About joining the company, you mean.”

Bristol nodded, and her glossy black hair hanging straight to her back slid over her shoulder. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s a hard decision to leave your deputy position.”

“But you did it.” Bristol slid her fingers into her hair and swept it up into a ponytail. “How did you decide what to do?”

The elderly woman next to Bristol angled as if trying to eavesdrop, so Peyton inched closer to her sister. “It was different for me. Thomas had just died.” Her voice cracked at the mention of her brother and she took a breath.

“Leaving a big void at the company,” Bristol filled in for Peyton.

“Yeah, and as the oldest, Londyn was a natural to take his place. But she has the detective job all dialed in and doesn’t want to leave the force. I was going nowhere fast as a deputy. I mean nowhere. Made sense to step up for our family.”

Thoughts of Peyton’s life a year ago came flooding back. “I was tired of patrol too. Reaching burnout. I had to face the fact that I wouldn’t make detective soon, and I needed a change.”

“Yeah. I get that. I’m not even sure I want to be a deputy and have *zero* desire to move up the ranks.” Bristol nibbled on her lower lip. “I’m starting to think I went into law enforcement because it’s what the Steeles do.”

Peyton understood her sister’s feelings. Completely. Three generations of the family had served in law enforcement. She or her sisters or cousins didn’t want to be the first family member to break the tradition. And even if they did, their fathers had set conditions for joining Steele Guardians. Each of them was required to serve in law enforcement for five years to learn how criminals think. Their fathers believed it would allow them to provide better protection for their clients.

Bristol had just passed her five-year mark in a job that was becoming increasingly difficult to do. Law enforcement officers had to have their heart in the work to put up with all the politics in the job these days.

Peyton’s phone pealed from her pocket. She jumped, and her heart lurched.

Could this be the thing that had put her on edge?

The screen displayed a call from Alex Armstead of Armstead Jewelers.

Peyton held out the phone to Bristol.

“Your new client,” Bristol said. “I thought he’d signed his contract and everything was good.”

“He did and it was.” Maybe something changed. Peyton tapped the screen and took a breath to make sure she eliminated any worry from her tone. With the current downturn in the family business, the Armstead Jewelers’ account was extremely important to them. “Alex. How can I help you?”

“Help me?” His normally deep tone raced higher. “You can bloody well get over here and tell me who stole my diamonds.”

Peyton’s heart pumped hard in her chest. “You had a break-in?”

“No evidence of a break-in, but my black diamonds are missing from the safe. They’re worth a million dollars, and I hold you personally responsible for the loss.”

*

Grant Logan stared at the open jewelry safe at the Beaverton branch of Armstead Jewelers, the flagship store in the chain of five stores where Alex Armstead had his office. Grant had been on the job as the store’s security manager for exactly one day and one hour. A million-dollar theft wasn’t the way to begin a job. No way at all.

He resisted sighing in front of manager Kayleen Ireland. Not the thing to do with her eyes on him as he took another long look at the massive safe. Almost seven feet tall and four feet

wide, the safe displayed no evidence of tampering. Definitely no forced entry from a power drill. The thief could've used a computer-aided device that wouldn't show any damage, but such a process would take up to thirty-six hours and the burglar only had the overnight hours to perform the work.

No way anyone cracked the top-of-the-line, highly rated safe. Had to be an insider with the key to the safe room and the safe's combination.

Grant turned to Kayleen, a short female dressed in red slacks and a white blouse that looked like one of his paint shirts with random red and black brush marks. She was twisting her hands together and was jittery and wild-eyed.

Suspicious? Maybe. Maybe not. Just the idea of a theft at her place of employment while under her watch as manager could cause such a reaction. Still, she was a viable suspect and needed to be treated like one.

He gestured at the doorway. "Let's go to the office and talk about the missing diamonds."

She darted from the room like Speedy Gonzalez, the vintage cartoon Grant had spent hours as a child watching.

He followed, but when he reached the showroom filled with empty jewelry cases, two women entered the store and came to a stop as did Kayleen. He glanced at her. "You go ahead. I'll be there in a minute."

She rushed away, and he turned his attention back to the door where an armed and uniformed guard from Steele Guardians stood at attention. Patrick greeted the women with a nod and smile.

“Patrick,” the redhead said to the guard. “Good to see you again.”

“And you too, Ms. Steele.”

“You need to start calling me Peyton.” She smiled at him.

Patrick shifted uncomfortably and faced the other woman.

“Ditto for me,” she said. “Bristol. Not Ms. Steele.”

Patrick nodded, but he stiffened his shoulders.

“I want the front door locked and you to remain in place,” Peyton said. “Don’t let anyone in or out without my okay.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Patrick gave a sharp nod.

Peyton cringed. She was the CFO of Steele Guardians, but she didn’t seem to like the formality. Interesting. She wasn’t power hungry. Grant liked that. And he liked her looks. In fact, something drew him to her. Something he’d been missing since his wife had died two years ago.

His research of Steele Guardians and the family behind the company told him the women were sisters, but they looked nothing alike. They both wore shorts, sandals, and winter jackets, but the similarity ended there. Bristol had a long ponytail, but Peyton’s hair was chopped bluntly near her chin. She was tall, maybe five-ten, her legs long and alluring. He liked that for sure. What guy wouldn’t? But it was something about the way she stood, as if she were certain in herself but uncertain at the same time that intrigued him.

Alex didn’t have a security manager before he hired Grant, and she’d set up security for this location when her company usually just provided guards. Even so, she’d implemented a

strong plan.

She was also the woman whose head Alex wanted on a platter as he came out of the backroom and marched toward the pair. He looked the part of a jewelry store owner. In his fifties, the guy had a thick head of black hair and a strong jaw. His black dress slacks and shirt were tailored to fit his toned physique.

“Peyton.” Alex’s baritone held a heavy measure of indifference. “Nice of you to finally join us.”

Peyton held out her hand and bright blue fingernails sparkled in the overhead light. “I’m sorry it took so long to get here. We were at the airport.”

Alex shook hands and gave her a once over. “Looks like you were headed someplace warm. What with the shorts and all.”

“Going to Arizona for some sunshine.” If she was irritated at missing her vacation, Grant didn’t see even a hint of frustration in her attitude.

Bristol on the other hand looked annoyed. Maybe Peyton was a workaholic like Grant tended to be. But no more. With his wife dying, their five-year-old daughter needed him more than ever. He’d taken the security job so he could work regular hours. He only hoped he would locate the diamonds quickly, and he didn’t break his promise to Sadie about not missing dinner and working evenings.

Bristol stepped toward Alex and offered her hand. “Bristol Steele.”

Alex pumped her hand with force, but she held her own.

“You work for Steele Guardians too?” he asked.

She shook her head, and her ponytail bobbed. “I’m a Multnomah County Deputy.”

Grant could easily imagine her in a patrol car, duty belt hanging on her hips, eyeing down a suspect. His research had told him each family member was either a former law enforcement officer or still serving. Being a former detective himself, that was another thing he admired about the family.

Peyton turned to Alex. “I would appreciate more details about the burglary.”

The strength in her focus intrigued Grant. That alone would draw him across the room, but he also needed to be included in any discussions of the burglary. He fully intended to find the missing diamonds to secure the job as security director overseeing all five of Alex’s stores instead of just this one.

He started across the swirly designed carpet and past the lit cases waiting for the manager to fill them for the day. Each evening at closing, management and a salesperson removed the jewelry and inventoried the high-end pieces, then locked them in the safe. Lower-priced items were locked in drawers below the cases, and the window displays were emptied too. In the morning, they counted it all again and filled the cases.

Alex waved at Grant. “Over here, Logan. You’ll be working with Peyton, and it’s time you two met.”

“Working with me?” The woman’s eyebrows rose, but she didn’t look away.

“Grant is the fella I told you about.” Alex shoved his hands into his pants pockets, and Grant noticed they trembled even though Alex seemed to be putting up a good front. “My new

security manager for this location, and after he proves his merits, I hope for the entire company.”

Peyton glanced at Grant. Her expression tightened before she shifted her attention back to Alex. “But you said the man you hired had tons of experience in law enforcement so I expected—”

“A much older guy,” Alex finished for her. “Grant was a superstar detective in the LAPD’s Commercial Crimes Division. He headed up their Burglary Special Section for five years, and you better believe he’s seen almost every kind of burglary. So yeah, he’s got tons of experience.”

“Grant Logan.” Grant held out his hand to Peyton. “Sorry to disappoint you on being so young.”

He grinned at her. He’d learned over the years that a warm smile could diffuse anything, even surprise. And he wanted her to like him. How pathetic was that?

“No offense to you regarding your company, Alex,” she said but kept her eyes on Grant. “You must’ve had far better job prospects in LA than here. So what brings you to Portland?”

Should he answer? It wasn’t relevant to the situation, but his parents raised him not to be rude. “My mother lives here, and I need help caring for my daughter.”

Peyton glanced at his hand.

Right. She was looking for a wedding ring. At least that’s what he’d be doing if he were her. She wouldn’t find one, but she *would* find a telltale indentation from the eight years he’d worn one. Though his wife, Marcie, had been gone for two years, he’d finally taken his ring off when he’d accepted the job at Armstead Jewelers. Not because he was ready to move on and get

married again, but when he'd decided to move to Portland for a fresh start, packing the ring away with their old life seemed to be the right thing to do.

"I'm Bristol Steele, by the way. Peyton's sister." The younger woman shook hands with Grant. Conversation had ground to an uncomfortable halt while he and Peyton assessed each other, and he suspected the sister had jumped in to get things moving again.

"We're getting off track here," Alex said.

"Agreed." Peyton let out a sharp breath. "What exactly happened?"

Alex raised his shoulders even higher and sweat beaded up on his forehead. Looked like the theft was bothering him more than he wanted to admit. "I came in early to do some thinking about the business and my manager, Kayleen, scared the heck out of me. She wasn't due in until nine, and she showed up a little after eight. We did our own thing for about an hour, but then her opening salesperson called in around eight-thirty. Said he'd be late. So I agreed to help her stock the inventory for the day."

His tone tightened as if the task was beneath him. Grant would've helped at nine, but they didn't wait for him to arrive.

He smoothed his palms over his pant legs. "She opened the safe, and that's when I noticed the shipment of black diamonds I received last week was missing. The safe was properly secured as were the exits. No sign of forced entry. So Kayleen checked the feed from the security cameras. The footage doesn't show anyone entering the store or accessing the safe since she locked it last night. Well, except the two of us this morning."

Peyton frowned. "Were the cameras working but no one appeared on the feed?"

“Recording is working perfectly,” Grant said. “No glitches.”

Peyton’s eyes flashed wide open. “That’s impossible.”

How could she be so adamant when she was wrong? It was not only possible, but it happened. Grant didn’t know how, but it did. Arguing and irritating her when she was obviously upset wouldn’t be cool, but she needed to accept the facts.

Attraction or not, he had a job to do here. “You’re welcome to review the feed.”

She planted her hands on her slim waist. “I’ll not only look at it, I’ll also have the computer expert at the Veritas Center review it to see if someone replaced the feed with other footage.”

Veritas meant truth in Latin, but what kind of truth a center might be looking for, Grant didn’t know. “Veritas Center?”

“It’s a private forensics lab with state-of-the-art equipment and world-renowned scientists here in Portland. They’ve been vetted by law enforcement and are on their approved independent lab list.”

Alex grimaced. “Sounds costly.”

“You can’t put a price on finding the diamonds before they disappear forever.” Peyton’s hand shifted to a sidearm concealed by her jacket. “If you don’t want to spend the money, I can try to get them to work pro bono. They do a lot of free work, but I honestly don’t think your theft would fit their criteria.”

Alex pulled his hands out of his pockets and curled them into fists. “I’ll pay within

reason.”

“I’ll get an estimate to you before I have their expert review the data.” Peyton gave him a tight smile. “I’d also like to have their forensic expert process the scene.”

She was taking over, and Grant didn’t like it. Not at all. The theft stunk, but he could use the situation to prove his worth to Alex. “The police can do that.”

“No.” Alex’s face paled, and he swiped a hand over his forehead glistening with perspiration. “No police.”

Grant studied his employer. Why wouldn’t he want the police involved? Was the guy just upset over the theft or hiding something?

“We have to call them,” Peyton said.

Alex ground his teeth, and his gaze flitted around the room. “No. Not happening. I had a run-in with them when we had that attempted robbery. They didn’t do a thing to help. Don’t see a reason to get them involved only to be frustrated all over again.”

Ah, yes. The attempted robbery. Alex had told Grant all about it and assumed since Alex hired Steele Guardians at that time, that Peyton was also in the know. The daring daylight intrusion had been interrupted when Kayleen pressed the panic button and sounded an alarm to summon the police.

“Insurance will require a police report,” Peyton said.

Alex fisted his hands, but shot a nervous look around. “Fine. Call them, but I’m not counting on them.”

“If you’re not counting on them, then what do you propose we do?” Bristol asked. “I’m sure you want to recover the diamonds.”

Alex switched his attention to Peyton. “You and Grant investigate.”

Peyton’s eyes opened wide. “I’m not sure—”

Alex lifted his shoulders. “I get it. This isn’t part of our contract, but if you want to keep the contract and expand it to my other stores, then you’ll find my diamonds.” He shifted to face Grant. “And the same goes for you. You want to be my company head of security. Find the diamonds.”

Grant had expected to be asked, but... “I’m glad to investigate, but I’d rather work alone.”

“You don’t think I’m up to the task?” Peyton lifted her delicate chin.

“I don’t know you and have no idea what you’re up to,” he answered honestly.

“I’m a former Multnomah County Deputy, so I assure you I have investigative skills and have a handle on proper procedures.” She widened her stance, but it was hard to take her seriously with her hot pink flip-flops and blue toenails.

He worked hard not to show his lack of confidence in her skills, and not only because of her attire. A patrol deputy usually handed incidents over to detectives after taking initial details and filing a report. She might have natural investigative skills, but they were likely untested.

“I can see you’re not impressed with that.” She crossed her arms, her expression hurt and angry at the same time. “You might think you can go this alone, but you’ll need help with local

law enforcement. Connections you don't have. My family and I do."

"She has a good point." Alex let out a long breath. "And even if she doesn't, I insist she be involved. It'll tell me what she and her company are made of. Plus, it just plain makes sense that the more resources I throw at the problem, the better chance I have of finding the diamonds."

"Yes, sir," Grant said, knowing when to give in.

Alex furrowed his brow. "I suggest the two of you get to work right away and get those diamonds back in my hands before I fire the pair of you."

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