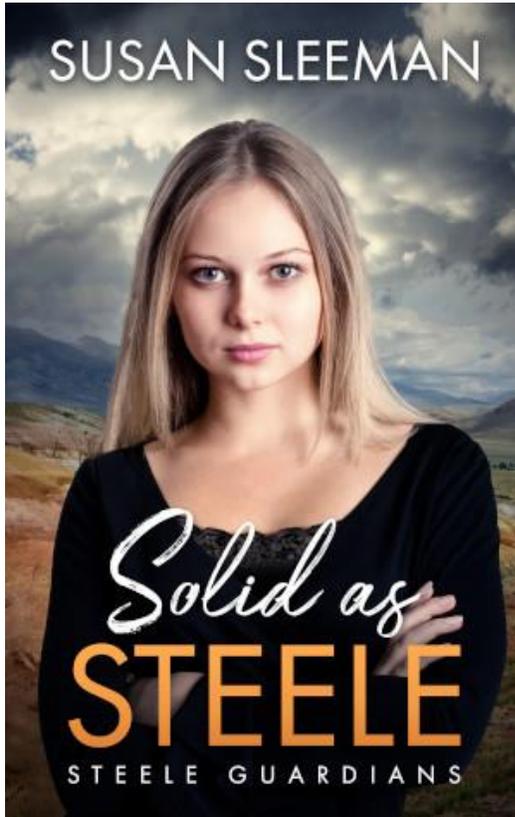


## SOLID AS STEELE SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Print, E-Book, and Audio

**Steele Guardians Series** – FEBRUARY/2023

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### **He lost his memory...**

Mackenzie Steele has been instrumental in keeping Steele Guardians afloat, working long hours for months. Nearing burn out, her family encourages her to take a vacation, and she reluctantly agrees. She needs solitude and quiet, and a vacation rental home in the Oregon desert is just the ticket. But she's no sooner unpacked her bags when a man lands on her doorstep. A man who can't remember his identity or why he's there. All they know is that the name Owen seems familiar to him.

### **But will finding it bring a killer to her doorstep.**

Mackenzie shouldn't trust this man, but something about his earnestness draws her to him, and she agrees to help him determine his identity. When her rental

home is bombarded with bullets, she knows she's accepted a task that could turn deadly, and she should walk away. But by this time, her deepening connection with the stranger keeps her firmly rooted at his side, and she can only pray that she won't regret her potentially life-altering decision.

## Chapter One

The body lying on the front porch wasn't included in Mackenzie Steele's vacation home rental.

But there he was. Out front of her rustic cabin in the Oregon High Desert as she peeked out the front door.

A large, broad-shouldered man. His back to her. His legs curled up. Wearing dirty and torn athletic

pants and a navy blue sweatshirt stretched tightly over his muscular back. Blood caked in his deep brown hair, and he looked like he'd traveled a distance on foot, reached her porch, and dropped.

Unmoving.

Was he dead?

*Now what?* Her coffee was only starting to brew. How could a girl think after only four hours of sleep and no java?

So what should she do? *Yeah, what?*

She was alone in this desert cabin sitting on one-hundred-fifty private acres and bordering government land for miles and miles. Her only company included deer, coyotes, and other small animals.

If this guy was alive, she couldn't risk talking to him. Not yet. Not while unprotected.

She closed and locked the door without a sound then backed up to the bedroom she'd chosen for her stay. Her gun safe sat on the floor where she'd dropped it last night after she arrived in the dark. With shaky fingers she tapped in the combo. The door popped open, the click like a trumpet siren to warn the man of her actions.

*Stop. Just your imagination.* The safe opening had actually been quiet. The most important thing—she had a weapon and could protect herself while checking to see how severely the guy was hurt.

She shed her pj's, put on jeans and a T-shirt, then clipped the holster on her belt and shrugged into a zip-front sweatshirt to hide the gun. She might be in a desert, but overnight low temperatures hovered around freezing, and she also needed it for warmth.

Heart thumping in her chest, she strode over the wood floors to the rough wood door and cracked it open to poke her head out.

The sun, a magnificent red ball of fire, rose over mountains in the distance, and the breathtaking red

and orange striations of the Painted Hills in the foreground took her attention. For only a moment. Gorgeous, but if she stopped to enjoy God's colors radiating across the sky and barren land this morning instead of paying attention to the man, she could lose her life.

He hadn't moved. Not one bit.

She took a breath.

"Hello," she called out.

No movement. Nothing.

"Hey you," she said louder.

No response.

*Fine.* She had to get closer. Check his vitals.

She inched forward. Caught sight of his chest moving. *Okay, good. He's alive.* But obviously injured.

"Sir," she said. "Are you okay?"

No answer.

She moved even closer, standing over him now. One more attempt to get him to move via a voice command.

Failed.

She squatted, put a hand on his shoulder to shake him.

*Flash.*

He came awake. His hand clamping onto her wrist. He flipped her over his body and pinned her on the rough worn floorboards with a forearm to her throat.

“You’re hurting me,” she eked out as his arm pressed the breath from her body.

His eyes flew open, and he lurched back, releasing his hold. “Sorry. Oh, man. Sorry.”

She scrambled away from him and rubbed her throat. “You should be. You’re on my porch, and I just wanted to be sure you’re okay.”

“Yeah, right. I know.” He looked around, dark eyes piercing yet confused. “Where? Who?”

She should be afraid of him after that move, but his confusion turned to panic, and she felt sorry for him.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“I’m...” His words fell off. “I don’t...I mean, I can’t remember.” His gaze swept the area, panic lodged in every shift of his eyes. “What in the world is going on here? Who are you? Where are we?”

Was he for real or faking? She would go along with him for now and watch for anything that said she couldn’t trust him. “I’m Mackenzie Steele, and this is my vacation rental in John Day, Oregon.”

“Vacation? Oh, man, I ruined your vacation by landing here and tossing you around, didn’t I? Sorry. I would never hurt a woman. Guess I overreacted. All I know is I woke up with a hand on my shoulder. I felt threatened for some reason.”

He ran a hand through his hair and winced. “Hair’s sticky.”

“Blood. You’re injured.”

“I...”—he blinked long lashes and looked down—“I can’t remember hardly anything. Just flashes really. Waking up at the base of a small butte surrounded by miles of nothing. I didn’t have a phone or anything in my pockets. No watch. Nothing. So I started hiking. Took me most of the night, but I saw your lights. Got this far and must’ve collapsed.” He frowned. “Sorry I scared you.”

“It’s okay,” she said, but it really wasn’t. She’d never been manhandled like that, and it would take

some time to get over it and trust him.

What was she saying? She would ask him to move on and there would be no need to trust him.

But wait. Was that fair? He needed medical attention, and she couldn't send him packing. At least not without some food. Water. A look at his injuries.

"Let me get you some water." She jumped to her feet and took a wide berth around him to enter the small two bedroom cabin. The rustic interior and rugged stone fireplace that she'd found incredibly charming last night held no appeal right now.

The view now only reminded her of her vulnerability, and she had to be careful if she wanted to stay alive. Very careful.

\*

She was running from him, this Mackenzie Steele. Of course she was. A gorgeous woman with glossy blond hair, big eyes, and a toned body. She had to be careful around strangers. Especially strange men. Dangerous men.

Men like him.

His gut cramped. He wasn't the guy she must be thinking he was. Or was he? *No*. That he knew for certain. Sure, he didn't know his name or any details of his life. Not even the reason for his injury, but he *did* know he would never hurt a woman on purpose. Never. Knew that deep in his core.

And yet, he had. Grabbed her like a sack of potatoes and flung her to the floor. Slamming his arm into her neck. Would his rough handling leave a bruise? Leave evidence of his behavior?

*God, please, no.*

*Well, there you go.* He'd prayed. That was something else to go on. He must believe in God for a prayer to pop into his head. A comforting thought for sure. The first one since she touched him. Or maybe the

second one. She comforted him too, even while those big eyes were filled with panic.

Another thing he knew?

This woman—this curvaceous beauty—was carrying. He'd caught the bulge of her holster through her sweatshirt. Didn't fit with her very feminine appearance. Not at all.

Listen to him. Profiling her like that. Stereotyping. What did he know? Nothing right now.

Dread inched up his throat in rancid bile. He swallowed it down. He had to ignore these thoughts. Make a plan. Take action.

What was his next step?

The door opened. She stepped out carrying a bottle of water and a plate holding a large bagel slathered in cream cheese. "I figured you would be hungry too."

"Thank you."

She stepped halfway to him. "No offense. I won't hand this to you, but I'll set it down on the floorboards and go back for some coffee."

"I understand. You have to be careful," he said with as much conviction as possible.

"You want coffee?" She placed the plate and bottle near her feet.

"Please. Black as can be." Okay, great he knew how he took his coffee. Something else to go on. Not really of value but something.

She backed into the cabin.

He didn't want to scare her, so he waited for the door to close then grabbed the plate and propped his back against the rough cedar siding. He cracked the water bottle and nearly drained the cool liquid before she returned with two large stoneware mugs of coffee. Without a word, she set one on the floor then backed up to a

rocking chair and sat.

She wasn't overly tall. Five-eight, he guessed, but her height was in her legs, which she elegantly crossed. She sipped on the mug, staring ahead.

"I don't want to scare you," he said. "But I can't resist the smell of the coffee, and I'm going to grab the mug now."

She peered at him. "I've been scared since I spotted you."

"I get that, and I'm sorry for it." He smiled at her as he leaned over to grab the rich dark coffee with steam rising into the frosty morning. "Thank you for being so generous and giving me something to eat and drink."

"I considered sending you packing." She sounded very earnest and straightforward and he liked that too. "But my faith wouldn't let me do it."

He took a long sip of the strong coffee and stifled a groan over the deep, nutty flavor. She liked her coffee the way he did. Strong and potent. Though it looked like she dosed hers liberally with cream. "I might not know much about myself, but I prayed a minute ago. Guess that means I believe in God too."

"Could be." She rested the mug on her knee. "But some people who aren't practicing Christians call out to God in times of extreme duress."

"I hope you're wrong, and I'm a man who lives his life by faith." Another sip of coffee and he traded the mug for the bagel.

"Me too." She met his gaze and locked on. "So what now? Should I call the county sheriff's office? See if anyone reported you missing?"

"No!" His outburst startled her, and she jostled her coffee, the caramel-colored liquid sloshing over the top.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t know why I reacted like that.”

“Maybe because you were breaking the law when you got hurt, and you don’t want to get law enforcement involved.”

He took a breath to cool down. “That’s possible. Doesn’t feel right though.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What other explanation could there be for such a response?”

“I don’t know.” Thoughts raced through his head, and he chomped off a bite of what turned out to be a cinnamon and raisin bagel. He chewed the sweet dough and swallowed. “Maybe I don’t trust law enforcement.”

“Then you don’t trust me.”

“You’re an officer?”

“Not now, but I was a detective in the Oregon State Police investigations division. Worked for OSP for over five years.”

Explained her reason for carrying. “And now?”

“Now I work at my family’s business. Steele Guardians. We provide security guards for companies and events. We’re based in the Portland metro area but have clients all over the Northwest.”

“Sounds impressive.” He took another big bite of the chewy bagel with crisp edges.

“My dad and uncle started the business after they retired from law enforcement. Now they’re wanting to retire, and my sisters and cousins have left law enforcement to take over.”

“A family of cops.” He polished off the first half of the bagel.

She nodded. “My dad and uncle have a rule. If we want to run the company, we had to serve in law enforcement for five years first. They said it would teach us to think like a criminal.”

“And did it?”

“More than you can know.”

“Which is why you’re suspicious of me.”

“That and you could snap my neck without breaking a sweat.”

“Yeah, there is that.” He took a long pull on the earthy coffee. “But I wouldn’t. At least I don’t think I would.”

“Any memories come back yet? Like your name?”

He shook his head.

She lifted a delicate eyebrow. “Can I make some observations?”

He reached for the other half of the bagel. “Sure.”

“No wedding ring or telltale ring from wearing one. Probably single. Your clothing and shoes are top-of-the-line. Your haircut isn’t a cheap one. You reacted to my touch like someone with martial arts training or military background. Maybe even law enforcement training.”

He swallowed. “Which could mean I’m a good guy.”

“Or a successful criminal.” She wrinkled her cute nose and smiled.

He laughed. Man, what a good feeling to lighten up here. With this beautiful woman.

“I’ve been thinking about it since I first saw you,” she said. “You could be from anywhere. Even out of state. We need to look close first then expand our search if needed. I want to call OSP. I have plenty of contacts there and can get what I need without many questions.”

He might agree to let her do that. Actually, if she wanted to make the calls, he wouldn’t stop her. That would take physical restraint, which he would never do. “What will you tell them?”

“Nothing much. Just ask if there are any missing person’s reports for men fitting your description.”

“Okay. I guess.” He took another bite of the bagel that now tasted like the dust swirling in the dry desert landscape.

She set down her mug and used her cell phone to make the call. “Jeffers, hi. Mackenzie Steele.”

“Steele!” The responding voice boomed over the phone.

Mackenzie held her cell away from her ear. “I have a favor to ask.”

Jeffers muttered something.

She explained her need. “I’ll hang on while you run the search, if you don’t mind.”

She looked at him. “He’s running a check in the Oregon database. If he strikes out then he’ll move on to NaMus. National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. A database of missing people searchable by law enforcement. With all the records, the search could take some time.”

“There are that many missing people?”

She nodded. “Estimates say nearly eight million people around the world go missing every year. Ninety percent or more are found, but still, that’s a huge number.”

She turned her attention back to the phone. “No. No facial scars or visible tattoos.”

She cupped her hand over the phone. “Can you check for tats elsewhere?”

He ripped off his sweatshirt and found a shoulder tattoo. A black cross. He ran a finger over it. Scar tissue. He covered up a wound or surgical scar. Maybe the cross meant that his faith had a part in that. But what?

He leaned closer to display it for Mackenzie. Her eyebrows lifted but she didn’t say anything other than to relay the information to this Jeffers guy.

Okay, she wondered about the tat too. Maybe this tattoo held the answer to his memory loss and injury and knowing about it would help him recover his identity. Maybe.

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