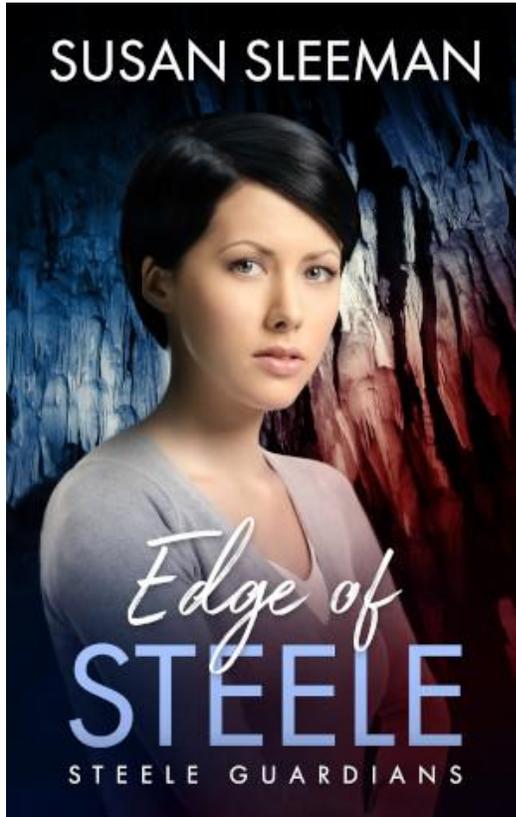


EDGE OF STEELE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

Steele Guardians Series – May/2023

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With enemies surrounding her...

Ryleigh Steele gives in to mounting pressure from her siblings and cousins and leaves her job as a law enforcement officer to join the Steele Guardians. She's just getting her feet wet when a local lumber company begins receiving threats, and the owner contracts with Ryleigh for the Steele Guardians to protect their workers. But the threats quickly escalate under her watch, and a bomb is detonated at one of the sites, killing one of the workers.

Can she find the killer and save her company's reputation and her life?

Ryleigh takes the man's death personally and commits to finding the killer. Trouble is, the owner has hired a security manager without Ryleigh's knowledge, and

the manager isn't about to let anyone cut him out of this investigation. Ryleigh gets ready to do battle with him, but when she meets the handsome head of security, former Navy SEAL Finn Durham she can barely find the words to speak much less fight. She and Finn had once dated, a tumultuous month, that ended badly. Doesn't matter. She can't let their past or her residual feelings for him distract her in the hunt for the killer. If she's not careful, the killer will find her first.

Chapter One

Ryleigh's future was going up in smoke. Literally. Right before her eyes.

She cupped a mask over her mouth and plunged into the smoke and blowing sparks. Roaring, intense flames consumed the sawmill down the hill. Building by building. Sparks jumping. Walls burning. Flames higher than the nearby tree canopy eagerly waiting to catch fire. One building nothing but sticks of charred wood.

Smoke. Dark. Swirling like fire-filled dust devils. The sky yellowy-orange. Ominous.

Armageddon.

What on earth had caused this?

She'd never expected this sight. Not ever. She'd simply driven to Shadow Lake this morning to perform a surprise evaluation on the Steele Guardians' guard working at Shadow Lake Logging.

Ward. Their guard.

Ward Byler, a veteran deputy and now one of their finest workers, was on duty. Had he been caught in the flames? And the millworkers? What happened to them?

Her vantage point didn't allow a clear enough view to assess. She had to move closer. To see. To help. To find Ward.

She adjusted the N-95 mask she kept in her SUV and hurried ahead. The heat grew in intensity on the already warm July day. Neither deputies nor fire department had arrived on scene.

She scanned ahead. Couldn't see anyone. Early afternoon on a Friday and the workers should still be milling lumber. Flatbed trucks lined the side of the road, their beds empty and waiting for freshly sawn Oregon logs. Cars filled the large parking lot, all signs pointing at a crew working this location.

Her throat tightened. Had all the workers perished?

Maybe Tobias Hogan, the owner of Shadow Lake Logging, knew. Or was he here? Inside? He was usually at the company office or explosives' depot located only minutes down the road. Surely he knew about the fire and would be here checking on his employees.

She reached the mouth of the driveway, sparks jumping on the heated air down a slight incline, the nearby trees charred black. The fire raged through the front buildings, the rear structure already consumed. Took everything in its path and burned out. Mostly smoke in the back of the complex now. Some flames sizzled at the top of trees. Other trees stood like blackened sentries guarding the mill.

A door on a truck parked ahead opened, grabbing her attention. Ward, dressed in a Steele Guardians' uniform, dived out as if in a race for his life and bolted her way. He settled a mask over his soot-splotched face and square jaw.

"I'm glad you're here. It was a bomb." His words tumbled out like a gymnast at the Olympics. "No threat this time. Just an explosion."

No threat? Odd.

The company had received several bomb threats. The reason they'd hired Steele Guardians to stand watch over the people who worked at the sawmill and the loggers clearing land nearby. But

the threats stopped after they'd put a guard on duty twenty-four/seven and added security cameras around the main office area.

Now this. An actual bomb. *Unbelievable!*

What should she do? As a former FBI agent, she was the closest thing to a first responder and had to do something. But what?

She stared at the fire devouring the stacks of wood in the distance. The rear building looked like a pile of burned toothpicks dumped in every direction—the explosion.

She looked at Ward. “I assume you called 911 and the fire crew is on the way.”

“Called right after the bomb went off, but they're a volunteer department so it takes time.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“Don't think so. Today is a maintenance day and all the workers are on a trip with the boss.”

“Say what?”

“Mr. Hogan takes one day a month to maintain his equipment. While that's happening, he rents one of those fancy Greyhound-type buses and takes all the workers out for lunch, and then they do something fun. They're going bowling today. Says the perk helps retain workers.”

Explained why Tobias wasn't on site yet. “What about the maintenance crew?”

“They meet up with the others for a long lunch, then come back to work while the others go out for some fun. The night shift joins them too. So only one guy was on site when the bomb exploded.”

He took a long breath and pointed at the white Chevy pickup he'd tumbled from. The driver sat behind the wheel. “The day supervisor, Virgil Eckles. I was on my way to ask him a question when kaboom. If I hadn't gone, I...” He shuddered and looked over his shoulder. “I'd have been right there by the buildings. As it was, the blast threw me a good distance. Nothing broken, thank God. Anyway, Virg got a call from his wife. She's pregnant. Due any day. So he stayed back and was just about to go home when the bomb went off.”

Ryleigh kept her attention on the site, searching for what she didn't know. She did know she felt like a failure. Shadow Lake Logging was her first client since she joined Steele Guardians and everything had been going fine.

Until today. Until this. A bomb. A fire. All under her watch.

Now what? How did she not only ensure the safety of anyone here, but save the reputation of the family business? Of course, safety was first and the only thing she should be concerned with, but

she'd be lying if she didn't admit the other issue would remain in the back of her mind.

Please don't let it impact my decisions.

"I need to talk to Eckles." She hurried toward the man sitting behind the wheel. From this distance, all she could see was his bald head and blue shirt.

Could he be their bomber and was he in his truck because he'd set the bomb? Or was that simply a coincidence?

She stopped next to his truck and signaled for him to lower his window. He opened the door instead as Ward stepped up to them.

Eckles put on a mask, pushed out of the truck and slammed the door, the sound echoing in the eerie air. "Don't want my truck to take on more smoke than it already has."

She introduced herself. "Are you sure this was a bomb?"

"Positive. I've used my share of explosives on the job enough to know an explosion when I hear it. The blast occurred in Building A. Then a fire broke out. Jumped to the next building and soon everything else went up. Didn't take long, what with all the lumber and sawdust around."

Okay, sounded like his explosives background gave him the know-how to construct a bomb.

"Are explosives stored on this site that might've been set off by mistake?"

He shook his head. "Closest ones are at the main office under lock and key in the explosives' depot."

Thank goodness for that, at least. "Who has a key?"

"Tobias, of course. Me and Uri. He's the night supervisor. That's it." Eckles tugged on his mask to shift it higher. "You aren't thinking one of us done it, are you? It's them tree huggers, I tell you. Probably the ones who have been sending the threats too. They've protested all over the state but haven't shown up here. At least not until today."

She agreed. The ecoterrorist group Sovereign Earth seemed to be the likely culprits behind the threats, but her research hadn't uncovered any proof yet.

A vehicle slowed and parked down the road. She glanced that direction. A large pickup. Not the sheriff.

"I'm going to check the area that's burned itself out," Eckles said. "See what I can see."

"Not looking for victims, are you?" she asked. "Because Ward said all of the crew went to lunch except you."

Eckles's eyes creased. "Right. But I'm in charge of the day shift, and I have to be sure. See with my own eyes. You know?"

She did know. Being an FBI agent was all about teamwork and making sure you never did anything to put another agent in harm's way. She still carried that commitment with her.

"Could be another bomb in the area," she said.

"Lady, if there was, the heat and flames would've made it blow." The burly man started ahead.

She stepped in front of him. He pushed past her.

"You're going at your own risk," she called after him. "Watch for an explosive device. If you see anything, hightail it back here."

She or Ward could tackle Eckles to stop him, but the man knew the risk, and he had a point. If the bomber had planted another device, it would have to be between them and the original explosion, and the whole area had burned now. That left the possibility near zero. But not zero, and she wouldn't let Ward follow if he even wanted to.

She faced him. "Is Eckles a solid guy or do you like him as a suspect for the bomb?"

"Solid. Couldn't see him behind the bomb, but then, if my years as a deputy told me anything, it told me you can't trust a superficial opinion."

"Yeah.

Ward lifted his shoulders, his gaze tightening. "Here comes the company's new security manager. Been here for a couple of weeks but only met him once. Seems like a stand-up guy."

"A security manager? No one mentioned him." She spun to look down the road at a tall, broad-shouldered man. His face was turned toward the fire, and he marched toward them, purpose in his step.

"Sorry, I figured Tobias told you he'd hired the guy."

The owner hadn't said a word to her. Now why was that? Did this new guy plan to fire Steele Guardians? "What's his name?"

"Oh, man, sorry." Ward rubbed his forehead with a sooty hand. "I don't remember. An unusual name though."

She changed her focus to the manager as he strode her way. Sure steps. Confident. Authoritative. Would he become a problem for her and their company account?

"What do you want me to do now?" Ward asked.

Ryleigh faced him. “We need to set up a perimeter and make sure anyone who arrives stays behind it until the property is deemed safe. That includes us and this manager.”

“But what if someone needs our help down there?”

She glanced at the devastation. Could anyone survive that blast and inferno? Doubtful. “They’d likely be calling out. With the possibility of another bomb, I can’t risk anyone else’s life. Emerson County Sheriff’s Office isn’t big enough to have a bomb squad, but hopefully, when they get here, they’ll have someone with explosive experience who can clear the area.”

Ward made a grumbling sound. “It’s hard to stand down. I’m sure you get it since you just left law enforcement too.”

He got that right. If only she were still an agent. This bombing could well be domestic terrorism, and the FBI would offer their services to the local sheriff. As an agent, she’d be in the thick of finding whoever committed this crime instead of standing on the fringes and watching her family’s company lose a much-needed account. Maybe lose their reputation.

That was if the ATF allowed the FBI to get involved when they usually had priority on bombings. The sheriff would have to notify them as soon as possible.

“I have to ask you both to move back for your safety,” the deep male voice came from behind, familiar to her as it had often filled her dreams.

She spun. Stared at the man who’d walked up the driveway. The man who’d walked out of her life a few years ago.

“Finn,” his name whispered out on the last breath she could manage.

She blinked. Blinked again.

“What are you doing here, Ryleigh?” he asked through a mask, sounding none too pleased.

She drew in a breath and let it out. Tried to draw in another one, her brain acting sluggish as if every bit of oxygen had burned in the fire. She knew why she was there. She just couldn’t find the words.

Ward looked at Finn then at her, his forehead creasing.

Ryleigh couldn’t think about her guard right now. She couldn’t think at all.

“Excuse me. I… I gotta make a call.” Ward bolted toward Eckles’s truck.

“As far as I know, no one has called in the FBI,” Finn said, ignoring Ward’s movements. “Means you can’t be here in an official capacity. So what gives?”

She took a step back and lifted her shoulders, a reply finally forming in her brain. “I came to check in with Tobias on how my guards were performing and happened upon the fire. Why are you here?” she asked. She knew the reason but needed to buy time to digest the fact that he was standing there. In front of her. All six-foot-two of him, solid as a rock.

He cocked his head, drawing her attention to his red hair that fit his Irish heritage on his mother’s side. “I’m the new head of security. Didn’t Tobias tell you?”

Best to stick to short replies before she said something she would regret. “No.”

“That’s odd. He said he was going to send an email to the Steele Guardians rep to introduce me. You sure you didn’t get it?”

Trust me. If I saw an email containing your name, I would remember.

“No email.” She needed to move on. “Took you long enough to get here.”

“Had to evacuate the office and depot, then checked the area to be sure a bomb hadn’t been planted there as well.”

Of course he’d done the right thing. And likely without hesitating—unlike her. SEALs were trained to assess and act. Not that she hadn’t been trained for emergencies too, but he had far more experience in facing life-threatening situations. She ought to know. She’d worried for his safety long after he’d bailed on her.

Car doors slammed from the area where Finn had parked. Two men in turnout gear pounded toward them, moving at a high speed in the afternoon heat. Both guys were tall. Both took sure steps. But only one of them was a childhood friend.

“Ryan?” Ryleigh asked. “You’re a firefighter?”

“Hey, Ryleigh.” Ryan Maddox flashed her a smile, and she remembered the years as a kid following the lanky, blond boy around the Maddox family resort every summer. “We’ll catch up later. Who’s in charge here?”

Finn held out his hand before she could speak. “Finn Durham. Security manager.”

“Ryan Maddox.” Ryan gripped Finn’s hand. “What do we have?”

“A bomb detonated in the back building about twenty minutes ago now.” Finn jerked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing at the buildings that had been decimated.

“Anyone injured or trapped in the blaze?”

“Not that we know of,” Finn said before Ryleigh could. “All the workers are offsite all day. The supervisor was in his truck at the road, and the guard was on his way to talk to him.”

“That’s good news.” Ryan looked at the other firefighter. “Go ahead and radio this in and update others. We could need a wildland crew if this spreads to the surrounding trees.”

The guy nodded and stepped away.

Ryan turned his attention back to Ryleigh. “We’re a volunteer group. Troy and I live the closest, and the others should be here with the equipment soon. For now, you all need to—”

“Ms. Steele,” Eckles shouted from behind what was left of the front wall of the back building. He stepped out. “You’ll want to see this.”

“What is it?” Finn demanded in his Navy SEAL domineering tone before Ryleigh could respond.

“A body,” Eckles said. “I found a body.”

*

Ryan bolted toward the supervisor before Finn could even turn. Finn should wait for Ryleigh to head to the scene, but she stood frozen in the swirling heat, and he didn’t really want her to see the body anyway, so he jogged down the drive.

Please let her stay behind.

Her footfalls sounded, and she caught up to him.

Drat.

She grabbed his arm, slowing him down. “Hold up. We do this together.”

He jerked back and rubbed the area she’d touched. Earned him a raise of her eyebrows, but he wasn’t about to tell her it impacted him. A lot. Or make some stupid comment. Seeing her again had turned his brain to mush, and he wasn’t functioning at full capacity.

“You should stay here,” he said. “A person’s been killed. It’s dangerous.”

“Um, hello.” She rolled her eyes. “I was an FBI agent. I’m trained—”

“Was an agent?” He eyed her. With her cute short haircut that he learned was called a pixie cut after he’d taken seven-year-old Avery into his life, Ryleigh reminded him of a young girl instead of an FBI agent. “You left the agency?”

“Two months ago to work for the family.”

Wow! Just wow. “You used to bleed blue. You and your whole family. I never thought you’d leave the bureau.”

She fisted her hands on her curvy hips, a perfect place to rest his hand in the past when they’d

walked side-by-side.

She held his gaze. “And *I* never thought you’d leave the SEALs. At least that was the excuse you used when you ended things between us.” She paused, her gaze intensifying. “And yet, here you are.”

So she was still mad at him. Not surprising, but he couldn’t get into a personal discussion now. “Long story.”

“Yeah, for me too, and not one to get into now. We need to find out this victim’s identity and determine if they’re responsible for the bomb.” She lifted her chin as if she expected him to argue. “And you won’t stop me.”

“We’ll see how it goes.” A noncommittal response, but he didn’t want her wrapped up in a bombing. Didn’t want her in danger. Actually, now that he thought about it, he was thankful she’d left the FBI. He didn’t like thinking she went into potential danger every day, much like he’d done for years.

She took off, and he lengthened his strides to catch up.

They neared the blaze that still roared in the first building like a flickering monster hungry for the wood, and the heat knocked him back. They skirted the flames dancing and licking as sparks jumped from place to place, desperately trying to catch onto fuel before burning out. The smoke thickened and darkened the area decimated by the bomb. It had not only flattened the building and felled several trees but also charred the ground.

“Looks like a burnover,” Ryan said from behind the last standing wall. “The area burned hot and fast, leaving only embers.”

Ryleigh surged ahead and rounded the wall. The roar of the nearby flames filled the air, but Ryleigh’s gasp sounded above the hum of destruction.

He turned the corner. She stood over the victim charred beyond recognition, her eyes wide, her hand clamped over her mask. The victim was lying on his side, his limbs pulled tight against his torso.

Horrific. Like many of the tragedies Finn had seen as a SEAL. He’d learned the victim’s position was called the pugilistic stance—pugilistic meaning boxing. When a body burned, the elbows and knees constricted and fists clenched in the heat due to the shrinkage of body tissues and muscle dehydration—resembling a boxer’s stance. Charred, black debris surrounded him, and glowing embers were the only hints of fire trying to stay alive.

Question was, who had succumbed to the fire?

The burly day supervisor, Virgil Eckles, stood over the victim. His eyes were tight, his body

rigid.

Finn stepped over to him. “Can you ID this guy?”

“Smokey.” The name came out on a choking sound, and Eckles looked away.

“Smokey, really?” Finn shot another look at the body to see if he could recognize the night supervisor. The man oversaw the last half of a fifteen-hour work day in the summer when there was an abundance of light outside to move logs and materials.

But this guy? The body, if you could even call it that, was Smokey?

No way Finn could ID the victim by sight. “You’re sure?”

Eckles glanced back at the victim. “I mean, I can’t be one hundred percent sure, but what’s left of those boots are Smokey’s.”

“I’m not familiar with Smokey,” Ryleigh said, her tone tight.

“The night supervisor, Uri Gates. Got the nickname on his first logging job when he started a fire with a chainsaw. The name stuck with him. Anyway, that hunk of boot that’s left is his. His right leg is shorter than the other, and his right boot has a custom lift.”

Finn gave a side glance at Ryan. “How on earth did that piece of boot survive the blaze?”

Ryan pointed at a steel spade lying near the body. “It must’ve fallen onto the tip of his foot and blocked the fire. I moved it to see if there was a lead on his ID.”

“Why didn’t the shovel melt?” Ryleigh asked.

“Steel melts at two thousand degrees,” Ryan said. “Must not have gotten that hot in this area.”

Ryleigh squatted, her focus pinned on the remaining piece. “If his boots are custom, not likely that someone else would be wearing them. Or perhaps that’s not a lift, and the sole is that thick. Could someone else have a similar pair without a lift?”

“Not likely anyone on our crews.” Eckles shoved his hands into his pockets. “That brand’s price is out of reach for most of us. You could buy a couple pairs of sturdy work boots for one pair of those.”

“So why can Gates afford them?” Finn asked.

Eckles cocked his head. “He’s too new. Don’t know a lot about him, so I can’t say.”

Maybe he was paid to plant a bomb. “What was he doing here at this time of day?”

Eckles shrugged. “Could’ve come in a few hours early for his shift, but I doubt it. He didn’t

seem like the go-getter type to me. Didn't even know he was here."

"That's odd, right?" Ryleigh asked.

"Yeah," Eckles said. "He had to know Tobias wouldn't be here, and there would only be a skeleton crew doing maintenance. He'd pretty much have the place to himself."

"You think he had something to do with the bomb?" Ryan asked, sirens sounding from the road.

Eckles narrowed his eyes. "Just don't know him well enough to speculate, but him being here instead of at lunch with the others *is* suspicious."

Ryleigh stood. "We can speculate all we want, but it might not even be Smokey. Top priority is to get a positive ID."

Finn looked at Eckles. "You know what type of vehicle Smokey drives, and is it parked in the lot?"

Eckles nodded. "He's got one of them new Jeep Gladiators. Lime green. Can't miss it, but I didn't see it in the lot or on the road."

Ryleigh frowned. "Had to have hiked in then. If you were out front, he could've come in on the logging road back here. If so, he couldn't have parked close to here or his Jeep would be toast."

Finn squinted through the smoke to peer down the road leading away from them. "Don't see any vehicles."

"Say he's our bomber," Ryan said. "Wouldn't he want his truck nearby for a fast getaway?"

"I would," Finn said. "We'll look for the vehicle. I'll call him too. See if he answers. If so, we're not looking at Gates. I'll also check with Tobias to see if Gates is with the guys. If I don't get ahold of him, odds are better that we're right."

"He's single." Eckles's slumped shoulders rose for a flash of a second, then fell as if he was holding heavy logs. "No girlfriend and never married. Lives alone. So no one at home will report him missing."

"Then let me make that call," Finn said. "If he doesn't answer or isn't with Tobias, I'll send someone over to his place to check on him."

Ryleigh met Finn's gaze. "Even if we don't find Gates, we'll still need a positive ID. A chunk of boot isn't enough by a long shot. We'll need dental records and/or DNA."

Finn nodded and held his hand out to Eckles. "For now, I'll take your key to the explosives' depot."

Eckles batted his eyelashes. “My key? But why?”

“It’s for your own protection,” Finn said. “The sheriff will want to search the depot and check the inventory. I’d like to be able to tell them you didn’t have access from this point and could alter things.”

Eckles eyed Finn for a moment then jerked his key off a ring and slapped it on Finn’s palm.

“Thanks, man.” Finn pocketed it.

Vehicle tires crunched over gravel and air brakes sounded from the road.

Ryan jerked his head in that direction. “That’ll be the rest of the crew. Maybe the sheriff or deputies too. They’ll cordon off this area, and you all need to move back to the road for safety.”

Finn clamped his mouth closed to keep from saying anything. He was used to being in charge, not taking orders. He knew how to handle himself in more dangerous situations than most men. Likely more than Maddox here, except when it came to fires. Finn knew the basics though. They were unpredictable. Could turn on you in minutes. Took this guy out, after all. They all needed to take care, and he would listen to Maddox.

Sort of.

Finn eyed the firefighter. “You have the explosives training needed to clear the area for any additional bombs?”

Ryan snapped his shoulders back. “Our crew is trained in the basics. Nothing advanced.”

Okay, fine, Finn’s question had annoyed the guy. “Just asking because I’ve had advance explosive training while serving in the Navy, and I’m glad to clear the area.”

“Explosives, really? As a sailor?” Ryan’s eyes crinkled with amusement.

“He was a SEAL,” Ryleigh said, sounding unimpressed.

Ryan scrubbed a hand over his short blond hair. “Oh, right. Then yeah. You’ve probably got the goods to do it. But this is a crime scene, and I still need approval from the officer in charge before you can search.”

Finn opened his mouth to argue. Stopped. Wouldn’t hurt to wait a few minutes to follow protocol. This body was going nowhere, and if everyone moved back for safety, then another bomb wouldn’t threaten them.

Besides, if he remained at the scene, so would Ryleigh. Sure, he’d broken up with her after a whirlwind relationship. Had thought of her and played the what if game on a regular basis. He was the one who ended things and shouldn’t have such intense feelings over seeing her again,

but he did.

And when he cared about someone? The protective instinct he'd developed to protect his sister, Hadley after losing his parents rose up.

So no matter what Ryleigh wanted, he'd do anything—everything—to be sure she didn't get hurt. Even if he died trying.

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