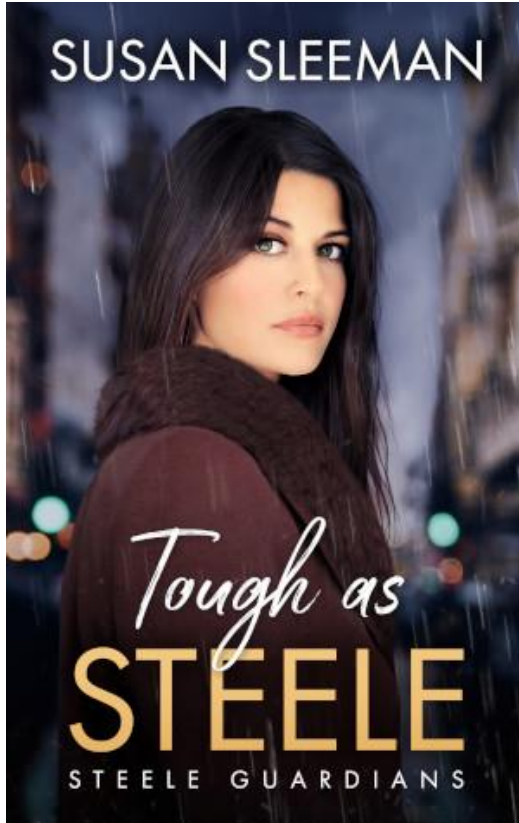


## TOUGH AS STEELE SNEAK PEEK



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

**Steele Guardians Series** – FEBRUARY/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

If Londyn had to stay at this party for one more minute, she couldn't be responsible for her actions.

"Stop scowling, Londyn," her mother said from where she stood next to Londyn, a chilly

breeze playing over them. “Our host will think you don’t want to be here.”

Londyn gritted her teeth. Her mom was right. As usual. No point in arguing. She almost always was. She didn’t want Londyn to offend Mimi Vandervoort at her eightieth birthday party. Not that she’d appeared yet. She was fashionably late to her garden party beneath a large white tent in her perfectly manicured backyard. An odd choice of venue for February in Portland. The temps had reached a record high of sixty-eight today, but the night air was chilly.

Londyn tugged her nubby silk jacket closer to her body against the sharp breeze.

*No. Stop. Don’t reveal that you’re carrying.* Seeing a sidearm in her holster was bound to put people off. She was a detective for the Portland Police Bureau. She wasn’t on duty, but she always carried. Always. And especially tonight as a representative of Steele Guardians. Their family business was providing security for tonight’s event.

She took a long breath to let out her frustration. She forced the smile she used when starting a police interview and turned to her mother and father.

“Now you look like someone’s strangling you.” Her dad grinned. He should know. He looked like he was choking on his tie paired with his formal black suit that usually only came out of his closet for funerals, weddings, and contract negotiations with their clients.

“What I want to know is why didn’t everyone else have to come?” Londyn asked. Somehow her two sisters and three cousins, several of whom were taking over the running of Steele Guardians as her father and uncle settled into retirement, managed to avoid this party.

“Simple,” her mom said. “You’re the only one who said yes.”

Londyn gaped at her mother. “You mean it was optional? You didn’t make it sound that

way.”

“I said we needed to represent the company well.” Her mom smoothed her hands over her only party outfit, a tan A-line dress paired with white pearls and a silky black blazer for warmth. “You stepped in the way you’ve done since Thomas died. You’ve taken on responsibilities of the oldest now and felt obligated to come.”

Londyn resisted frowning. She missed her older brother. His murder last year had rocked her world and left Londyn as the oldest sibling in her immediate family and also with her three cousins. Thomas had filled that role so admirably, and Londyn didn’t resent taking over for him. At least not most of the time, but tonight was weird for her. She wasn’t a party girl. No way she attended top-tier socialite birthday parties. Police detectives weren’t often invited to such events.

“Your mom and I are real proud of how you stepped up,” her dad said, his eyes tight with angst. Her parents, the whole family really, was still trying to come to grips with Thomas’s needless death. None of them would ever be the same again.

“Even if I didn’t hire on at the Guardians?” Londyn felt a need to point out the one area where she didn’t step up yet and might never do so.

“Even then.” Her dad smiled at her, and it was like looking into a funky mirror at the carnival. She not only looked like her dad, but she’d followed in his footsteps to become a detective. “You’re doing admirable work, sweetheart, and if you can and want to keep doing it, we both support you.”

“The company could really use this account,” her mom said. “Means we need you to be gracious and polite tonight to make sure that happens.”

Londyn nodded. Steele Guardians provided security guards for large corporations and special functions like this one. Mimi Vandervoort's family owned too many businesses to count, and tonight's job was a trial run for opening the door into the Vandervoort empire. Guardians' best manager was on duty tonight, but Londyn and her dad had worked out the security detail and were overseeing it from a guest's perspective.

"I'll be good, I promise," she said, trying hard to believe her words and failed miserably.

Her dad snorted and slid his arm around her shoulders. "How many times did we hear that when you were growing up and some sort of a scuffle found you?"

She grinned at him and opened her mouth to answer when a scream sounded from near the house.

"She's missing," a woman screeched from the second-floor balcony. "Ms. Vandervoort is gone."

"Stay here and make sure Mimi's daughter stays out here too," Londyn shoved her evening bag into her mother's hands as she kicked off her shoes. "We don't want her to see anything that could disturb her."

"I'll make sure of it," her dad said.

Londyn broke into a run and charged toward the back entrance. Thankfully the dress was stretchy, but she wished she'd ignored her mom's fashion demands and had worn pants instead of a body-hugging dress.

She bolted over the soft grass to three wide stone steps that led to a brick veranda running the width of the ten-bedroom house. The Guardians' manager, Zeke Davis, climbed the steps

ahead of her, his head on a swivel, his hand on his sidearm.

“Wait up, Zeke!” she called.

He slowed and met her gaze, his prior ten years of service in law enforcement heavy in his expression.

“What do we have?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Heard Mimi’s assistant yelling and was on my way to check it out.”

They continued across the veranda and inside the massive foyer that ran to the front door.

“Any reports of anything suspicious at any of the entrances or out front?” she asked, her breath coming hard now.

He shook his head. “Just got a clean report from everyone.”

“You stay here where I can find you and tell the others to hold positions,” Londyn ordered, taking on her detective persona. If Mimi Vandervoort was indeed missing and had been kidnapped, Londyn would approach this from a law enforcement perspective, not as a company representative. “Lock this place down. Don’t let anyone or any vehicles leave the property.”

“Roger that.”

She bolted up the marble stairs, two at a time, stretching the dress to its maximum limit and fearing it might split. The stone was cold under her bare feet, the intricate wrought iron handrail smooth and shiny.

She reached the second floor landing. Mimi’s frantic assistant, Wendy rushed forward,

her short pencil skirt that hugged her curves restricting her steps.

“Are you the one who called out?” Londyn asked.

“Yes. Yes. Mimi’s gone. Her room is empty and there’s a—” Wendy’s words fell off on a sob. She ran her hand through wavy blond hair, her large blue eyes tight with concern. “A note. There’s a note pinned to her pillow.”

“Show me to her room,” Londyn ordered.

Wendy spun, and Londyn followed the *click, click, click* of Wendy’s spiky heels down a long hallway to oversized double doors at the end. They stopped at the doorway where Damon Richards, a guard for Steele Guardians, stood tall and in command in his uniform.

Wendy stepped back and pointed at the door with a shaking hand and fire engine red fingernails. “In there. The note’s in there.”

Londyn looked at Damon. “Have you gone into the room?”

He shook his head. “Zeke told us to hold our positions.”

She appreciated his unwavering obedience. “I’m going in. Keep an eye on Wendy until I come back.”

“Glad to,” Damon said.

“Be right back,” Londyn said to Wendy.

The other woman clutched her hands together and nodded, her eyes wide and frightened.

Londyn drew her weapon, and Wendy gasped. Londyn hated to frighten Wendy more,

but no way would she enter the room without taking on the right posture to clear it for everyone's safety, including her own.

She stepped through the door into a wide vestibule that led to a seating area with lavish furniture, some of the pieces antique and gilded.

"Ms. Vandervoort," Londyn called out, though she didn't expect an answer. She didn't know Wendy from a hill of beans, she'd only met her once, and for all Londyn knew, Ms. Vandervoort was in her bathroom and Wendy had overreacted. Wouldn't do to surprise the family matriarch.

Londyn rounded the corner to a large chamber with a massive four-poster bed, intricate details carved on all the posts. The room smelled like flowers, gardenias, Londyn thought, recognizing the scent from having helped in her gran's garden. A note was indeed pinned on the pillow. Londyn wanted to look at it right off the bat, but she stepped to the bathroom to clear the space first.

The area was bigger than Londyn's bedroom in the big historic house she shared with her sisters and cousins in Portland. In-floor heating radiated warmth from beneath the marble tiles and the sinks and faucet sparkled their cleanliness.

She turned back to the bedroom, looked in the huge walk-in closet, and holstered her weapon as she crossed to the note, her feet sinking into a plush Persian rug.

*We have the old lady. We'll call to arrange a drop for two million in one hundred dollar bills. Don't answer her phone and she dies. Call in the cops and she dies. Try to locate us and she dies.*

*No. Oh. No.* Mimi had been taken.

Londyn flashed back to an earlier conversation with Mimi when Londyn had done a walkthrough for tonight's detail. Londyn noticed a lack of exterior security cameras and suggested Mimi install a system. Mimi said she'd lived eighty years without cameras spying on her friends and family, and she could live the rest of her life without them. Little did she know how no video would hamper finding her tonight.

Londyn got out her phone and snapped a picture of the note then took a moment to pray for Mimi's safety.

"I don't care who told you to guard this door," an unfamiliar male voice rumbled from the hallway and broke her concentration. "This is my jurisdiction, and you will let me pass."

An officer? If so, he had to be from the Washington County Sheriff's Department. Mimi's house fell in their jurisdiction. How on earth had they arrived so quickly?

This wasn't good. Not good at all. Londyn was a city detective, not county. This guy could try to take over, and Londyn would be in a battle to remain in charge of finding Mimi. Losing Mimi would be tragic and would be terrible for her family. Finding her was the most important thing to Londyn, but it went deeper. Personal. Could Steele Guardians survive the negative publicity from the kidnapping, much less if Mimi were to lose her life? Not likely.

Londyn couldn't let the company fail. She had to remain in charge here. She just had to. If she had any hope of bringing Mimi home, Londyn would need to battle the determined officer heading her way.

\*



Nate Ryder stomped into Mimi's bedroom to warn the occupant that he was coming. He rounded a corner and spotted a woman facing away from him, weapon in holster, and staring at a pillow.

"If Mimi has indeed been taken, you're contaminating my crime scene.." He put a heavy measure of force into his tone and planted his feet on the wide-planked wood floor.

"She is, and it's my crime scene." The woman spun, her hand drifting toward her holstered sidearm. Eyes that were a mixture of blue and brown and ringed in black glared at him.

He wanted to fire back a comment, but when those eyes locked on him and drew him in like some magnetic force field, he had to take a step back. He didn't know her, that he was sure of. She was a looker with that fiery gaze, and the way she breathed with fierce passion cut right into him and sent his heart beating faster.

She lifted her chin, displaying a lovely long neck. "I'm Detective Londyn Steele with PPB. And you are?"

*Ah, yes.* He'd heard of her. Most everyone in local law enforcement had heard of her and her family due to her brother's murder. Nate had planned to attend the funeral to support a fallen officer but had been called to a homicide at the last minute.

"Detective Nate Ryder," he said, softening his tone. "Washington County."

"Well, Detective Nate Ryder, Washington County." She paused and her chin rose even higher. "I arrived on scene first, and I have skin in the game, so I'm preempting you."

He wanted to chuckle at the bulldog intensity coming from the woman who looked soft with luxurious waves of hair in the color of his favorite mochas, and a body snugging black dress that she'd topped with a cool turquoise jacket. Sure, she carried a weapon, but that only made her

intimidating and enticing at the same time. He didn't know if he should lean into the womanly vibe or the professional one.

*Dumb thought.* Professional, of course. It was always about the work for him.

He widened his stance. "I'm afraid my lieutenant will disagree with that and so do I."

"Then I'll have my LT call yours." She lifted her hand from her weapon, but he doubted it was due to trusting him.

"Won't make any difference. Jurisdiction is jurisdiction, and I have skin in the game too. Clarice and Charles have been like surrogate parents to me."

Her expression tightened, and she looked like she wanted to spit tacks, but she couldn't very well dispute his connection to Mimi's only daughter and her husband.

"I could make sure your LT knows about your personal connection, and he'll take you off the investigation."

"But you won't," he said, feeling confident in his take on the situation.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I don't know you yet, but the Steele family is well known in law enforcement for your commitment and loyalty to one another." He shifted, but kept holding her gaze. "So family is important to you, and you won't use mine against me because you wouldn't want me to do the same thing to you."

Londyn stepped closer and peered at him, those big eyes seeming bottomless in the muted bedroom lighting. He caught a hint of a scent reminding him of the peach cobbler his

mother used to make, intriguing him even more. Never had he found a fellow detective attractive, and definitely never encountered one that left him with the urge to lessen the distance between them.

“Look,” she said, continuing to hold his gaze. “My family company provided the guards tonight, and we’re vying for a contract for the Vandervoort global business. Tonight is a test to see if we can fit in at the company’s posh events, and the account is important for our company. Regardless of that, I can’t let someone go missing on my watch, and I sure won’t let someone lose their life. So I have to find Mimi.”

“I’m sorry.” For the briefest of moments, he thought to accommodate this woman who piqued his interest. But giving in to her would be personal, and he never did personal. Just business.

He raised his shoulders and continued to hold her gaze, trying to transmit his determination. He was all in—all the time. A leftover from his SEAL days. “I have a responsibility to Clarice and Charles too, and I’m not giving up jurisdiction.”

“Then let’s work together.” Her pleading tone almost made him want to agree.

Almost.

But he didn’t need the distraction of a beautiful detective when he was trying to repay his surrogate parents for the many years they’d blessed him. “Doubtful my LT will go for that. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to get a look at the note pinned to that pillow and secure *my* crime scene.”

She curled her hands and vibrated in place as if she wanted to stomp her feet, but

marched away. She was beyond angry, and he didn't blame her. She had a vested interest in this investigation, but so did he. The law was behind his interest, and he would lead this investigation, *if* his LT didn't pull him from the case due to his connection to the family. Nate would hold off telling his supervisor about that until it was absolutely necessary. By that time, hopefully Nate would be too invaluable to be replaced.

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