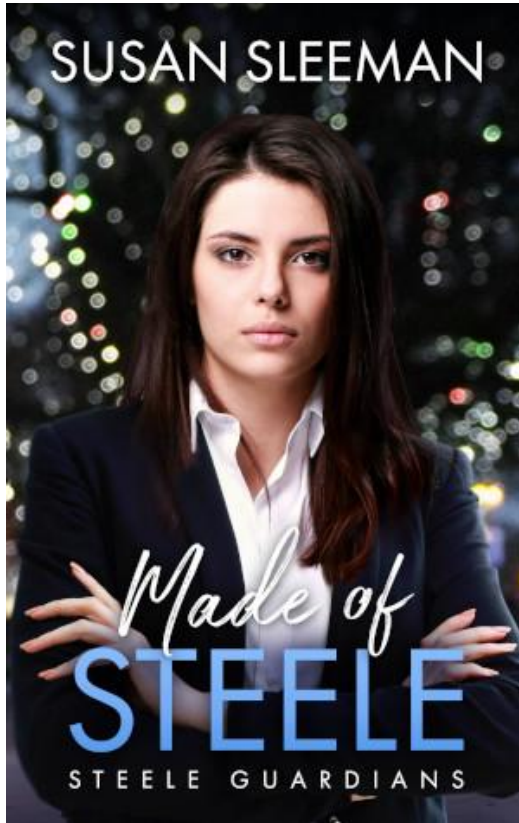


## MADE OF STEELE SNEAK PEEK



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

**Steele Guardians Series** – November/2022

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**She keeps her feelings to herself...**

When Teagan Steele faces her hardest challenge since taking over her family's security company, she has to dig deep to figure out how one of their clients smuggled antiquities into this country, and what they did with them. And she has to clear Steele Guardians of any charges of collusion and wrongdoing.

**But a bold undercover agent changes everything.**

When she comes face-to-face with undercover ICE agent, Drew Collier, who is deep in the smuggling ring, she has to work hard to keep her emotions in check and herself professional at all times. Despite her best efforts, Teagan and Drew grow closer, but a new threat soon puts their budding relationship to the test and their lives in grave danger.

### Chapter One

Teagan froze, her mind locked with choices, her heart racing.

She couldn't make a mistake. Just couldn't. The wrong move could cripple the family business her father and uncle had started.

Perhaps destroy it.

"Ms. Steele," the solid male voice of Patrick, one of Steele Guardians' best guards, came through the

phone.

“Sorry.” She paced through her office and stopped at her desk. “I need more information before I decide how to handle this. Run through the situation again. Don’t leave any details out.”

He let out a frustrated breath. “I was in the lobby of World of Crafts monitoring the live security feeds for the building. The main warehouse feed flickered. It was the area in the back where the owners’ office and private entrance is located. So I investigated.”

She stared at the glow her lamp cast across her sparkling glass desk. “You went into the warehouse?”

“Yes. Made my way to the back. That’s when I saw four men standing next to a large shipping crate. Since I’m subbing for the regular guard who’s at training this week, I’ve never met the owners, but figured that explained the ID of three of the men.”

“The three Conti brothers own the company so that makes sense.”

“Still, I hung back to watch. They took a bunch of boxes labeled glitter out of the crate. Then one of them lifted out padded packages from the bottom. The items he opened looked old. Way old. And this guy handled everything very carefully. I figure it’s ancient artifacts or something like that. They got super excited. Spoke in a foreign language. I couldn’t make out what they were saying.”

“Likely Italian.” She thought about the Italian-American owners as she turned to face the window overlooking their parking lot. She’d known the Contis for years. Honest. Hard-working men.

Or so she’d thought.

Could they be involved in something illegal?

She had to learn more. Delve deeper. “Artifacts, like what?”

“A couple of sculptures and something decorative that looked like it would be mounted on the outside of a building.”

“How could you tell they were ancient?” she asked, pausing at the window to look over the night sky.

“I don’t know. They just looked old. Figured you would know what was going on and should call you before I barged in on the owners and made them mad. But before I could make the call, one guy stayed behind to pack up the crate again and the others came my way. I hightailed it back to the security booth and relaxed so they didn’t have any idea I’d seen them. You know. Just in case.”

Interesting to say the least. “Did they come through the lobby?”

“No. So I checked warehouse video to see what was going on.”

“Were their faces captured on it?”

“No, and that was odd too. I played it back and it wasn’t the live action I witnessed. Just a boring feed of the area. No people at all. They had to have looped in an old feed to cover their actions. Only thing that makes sense and explains the flicker.”

Even more interesting. Bordering on intrigue. “And you’re sure you didn’t recognize them?”

“Never seen them before.”

She had to know who was in the warehouse before making a decision. “The owners’ pictures are on their website. Check it now and see if it’s the men you saw.”

“Hold on.”

She resumed pacing, getting more frantic with each step, her mind racing.

World of Crafts had sixty stores in the Pacific Northwest and ran a very lucrative online supply business. The brothers were eccentric at times, but she’d always found them trustworthy. Maybe she was simply overreacting, her former detective roots begging to be reactivated.

*Seriously, Teagan. You are letting your imagination go wild.*

Why suspect them of dealing in illegal goods?

“Yeah, it’s them,” Patrick said. “The fourth guy isn’t on the site though.”

“Go back to the warehouse. See what’s going on. Make sure the brothers aren’t under duress. But whatever you do, don’t get caught surveilling them. I’m on my way.” She kicked off her pumps.

“Should I call the police?”

“No.” She slid her feet into her running shoes. “Make sure the brothers are okay. When I get there, we’ll inspect these items. See if they’re really what you think and not some mass-produced décor pieces that World of Crafts plans to sell.”

“How are you going to do that?” His breathing increased as if he was heading to the warehouse.

“I honestly don’t know, but I’ll figure it out on the way.” She ended the call and shoved her phone into the pocket of her suit jacket. She tied her shoelaces, grabbed her backpack, and raced for the door.

The office hallway was dark and ominous feeling. Not because she feared an intruder waited in the dark to assault her, but that phone call could mean her worst fear was coming true. She’d been the chief operating officer for Steele Guardians for the past two years, and she’d already made one mistake. Big, giant, colossal mistake right after she’d taken charge that had nearly taken the company down. Each and every day since then, she feared she would fail her family again.

World of Crafts importing stolen antiquities right under Steele Guardians’ noses could not only destroy their business reputation but could destroy Steele Guardians too. If they didn’t have their reputation—they didn’t have anything. She had to do the right thing here.

Maybe she should call 911. Or was this really something simple? If so, why were the brothers hiding their actions with a looped-in security feed?

*I wouldn’t mind some guidance here.*

She kicked up her speed, pausing to get a key for WOC's main door from a locked cabinet at the end of the hallway before getting into her car. Her tires rolled over wet roads, mile after mile, toward the industrial area with warehouses and shipping containers near the airport. Not a vehicle in sight. Not unusual for midnight on a weekday.

She passed Christmas lights, but for once, they didn't do a thing to improve her mood. Thankfully, the usual winter rain had taken a break and continued to hold off for her drive.

She approached WOC's main headquarters, the sign at the road matching the garish red and blue neon ones at their retail stores. Shadows shrouded the single-story building with large glass block windows and the overcast night hid the moon. The only light came from a streetlight to her rear, the red and blue glow of the sign, and the twinkling white Christmas lights lining the front window. An older model red Jeep sat in the lot. Surely not one of the owners. They seemed to be swimming in money and drove flashy vehicles. Most likely Patrick's Jeep.

She started to climb out of her vehicle when her grandad's and dad's warnings came to mind.

*Forget how headstrong you are. Take care. Don't rush. Approach with caution.*

Former law enforcement officers, their warnings had saved her life numerous times as a deputy. They'd drilled caution into her, but since she'd left law enforcement, her leap-before-you-look personality had returned.

And tonight? Tonight she needed to take a moment. Be proactive. Protect herself.

She retrieved her Glock from her backpack and clipped the holster on her belt.

She took out her phone and located the group text for her sisters and typed—*Heading into WOC headquarters. Patrick says something is going down with antiquities. Maybe stolen. Call me if you haven't heard from me in 30 minutes.*

*Roger that,* came the text from Teagan's youngest sister, Ryleigh, who was a night owl too.

*Seriously*, Mackenzie texted. *Can't this wait for morning?*

*Urgent*. Teagan typed back. She could easily imagine Mackenzie in bed, the text having just woken her up, pushing her long blond hair from her face as she grimaced at the phone. Ryleigh, on the other hand, would be sitting behind her computer, tracking some cyber creep for her job as an FBI agent and wouldn't be hitting the sack for hours yet.

Teagan silenced her phone and stepped into the brisk evening. The sweet, pungent zing of coming rain filled the air, but not a drop fell on her walk to the front door. She looked inside the big lobby window to the security desk in the corner, where Patrick should be sitting behind the tall desk with multiple monitors. Or would be, if she hadn't told him to return to the warehouse to check on the brothers.

Had she sent him into danger?

Her stomach cramped as she unlocked the door. Inside, she paused to listen.

Nothing save the door whisking closed behind her.

"Patrick!" she called out, hoping he'd returned and had gone to the restroom at the far side of the space.

No response.

She locked the door and pulled her jacket back for access to her weapon. Stepping across the room, she passed the long reception desk painted a bright red to match the sign. The company's logo, a world with its name in blue letters, had been painted on the front. The graphic had seen better days, the top letters worn, maybe from visitors leaning against the desk over the years.

The unisex restroom door said *unoccupied*, but she jerked it open anyway. The overhead light flashed on. She took a quick look.

Empty.

Her heart thumped, and she let out a long breath before heading back to the other side of the space where a steel door led into the warehouse. She took a moment to consider her options.

Enter the warehouse or wait for Patrick to return? No brainer. She wasn't a waiting kind of person.

She pulled the handle and slipped into the dark room. The glowing red exit signs above the doors and a few single bulbs at ceiling height cast shadows and left the space dark and eerie. She let her vision adjust to the dim lighting.

Voices sounded ahead. Not Patrick's. Urgent. Demanding voices.

She drew her weapon and started forward, walking on her tiptoes. Silently. Cautiously. Entering the online sales storage area holding rack after rack of steel shelves with crates of supplies boasting easy-to-read labels.

She moved deeper into the space. Inching toward the loading dock.

Closer to the voices.

A hand shot out of the dark aisle behind her, cupping her mouth. Another arm, strong, like iron, jerked her body into the nearest aisle. Patrick sat on the floor, wrists and ankles bound. Gagged. His eyes wide. Worried.

She struggled to free herself. Kicking. Squirming. Jabbing with her elbows. No success. The man's rock-hard arms held her in place. Not one of the Conti brothers. The fourth man. Or maybe another person Patrick had not seen.

Her mind raced, flying over possibilities as she kept struggling.

What in the world had she and Patrick stumbled upon?

More importantly, would it cost them their lives?

Drew kept his arms around the woman he recognized as Teagan Steele. She kicked. Fought. Tried to scream. Her strength surprised him. She was slender but packed with muscle. Solidly packed.

“Shh,” he whispered in her ear. “I won’t hurt you. Just keeping you from making a mistake you’ll regret.”

She struggled even harder.

“If these men find out you’re in the room they’ll kill you. Same goes for your guard here. So stop moving and making noise. If not for yourself, for his sake.” Drew put as much urgency into his voice as he could while still whispering.

She went slack in his arms and planted her feet on the floor. He didn’t let go of her mouth or her very shapely body. A body he’d admired several times when she’d stopped by to talk with the Conti brothers about how her company’s security guards were performing their duties. She was all about customer service, and Drew suspected she would comply with his demands not for herself but for the guard. Drew had restrained the guy to keep him from stumbling into something that would get him killed.

The fake feed was supposed to have prevented all of this. So what had brought the guard back here?

And now this! Seriously. This was not how Drew had expected the night to go. He could only imagine the questions going through both of their minds, the first being who the heck he was and did he plan to kill them? As much as he wanted to explain, as an undercover ICE Agent investigating antiquities theft, he couldn’t say a word.

“I’m going to secure you, just as I did your guard,” he said. “I have to release your mouth. If you say a word, I’ll kill your guard. Do you understand?”

She gave a soft whimper.

*Oh, man.* The defenseless sound tore at his heart. He hated putting her through this and wanted to confess his real identity. That was one of the greatest challenges of undercover work. Keeping in character no



matter the situation. No matter how beautiful and charming the women he ran into.

To see a strong woman like her defenseless like this? And at his doing? That was rough. He wanted to tell her he wasn't killing anyone but needed her compliance for her own good.

He released her mouth, keeping his hand close for a moment to see if she would cry out, ready to clamp down again.

She let out a long burst of air, but didn't speak. He retrieved a zip tie from his pocket. When the guard started getting nosy, Drew had found ties next to flowery quilt fabric in the warehouse to contain the guard and tied a strip of the floral fabric around his mouth.

He bound her wrists together, trying to be as gentle as he could. He used the same fabric to gag her and eased her down to the floor, then zip-tied her slender ankles. She wore a body-hugging skirt and matching jacket in a pale blue color, accenting her shiny black hair. He'd never seen her this close up and looked in big brown eyes that were glaring at him with an icy stare that would freeze his emotions if he didn't find her so very intriguing.

"Sorry about this," he whispered. "It's for your own good."

She murmured something. Not likely a kind sentiment.

"Both of you stay here until we're gone. Then you can call for help."

Drew took one last look into those rich chocolate eyes pleading for help he couldn't provide. He took off for the trio of men. Drew had been undercover for nearly a year and the Conti brothers had only recently come to trust him. When a noise had sounded while they were looking at their stolen antiquities, he'd been dispatched to look into it. He'd found the guard. Another noise and there was Teagan Steele. Sneaking into the space.

He slipped through the warehouse and found the brothers gathered around an open crate. The middle brother, Aldo, held one of a pair of tablets with cuneiform inscriptions etched into the fragile clay. They were

believed to have originated in an ancient Sumerian city located in present-day southern Iraq.

Vito, the youngest and chubbiest of the trio, looked up at Drew. “Everything okay, Dylan?”

Drew nodded as his undercover name was mentioned. “Just the wind. Looks like we might have a real storm brewing.”

Sal, the oldest, the brother with piercing black eyes, caught Drew’s attention. “If it was nothing, why’d it take you so long?”

“I checked every inch of the warehouse. Thorough, like you taught me.”

Sal didn’t move for a long moment. “My brothers and I’ll get these items repackaged so we can get out of here before the rain hits. Make another pass around the building to be sure it was just the wind.”

As the oldest, Sal called most of the shots. Not easily though. His younger brothers tried to buck his authority whenever possible. Drew still hadn’t figured out which one of them had gotten the family involved in importing and selling illegal antiquities, but Aldo seemed to possess the most knowledge about them.

“On it,” Drew said and gladly took off to check on Teagan and her guard. He strode through the rows of tall racks until he reached the pair. He paused for a brief moment to glance down the aisle. Teagan and her guard remained in place. Both sitting rigid and attentive. Both firing an angry glare at him. Too bad. He wanted her to look at him with one of the warm smiles he’d seen when she’d stopped by the warehouse. But he had to let her think he was a criminal who was willing to restrain a defenseless woman.

He gave her another apologetic look and moved on to the lobby door, where he poked his head out. An SUV pulled up out front. Two women got out. The blonde was another Steele Guardians executive, but he didn’t recognize the one with near-black short hair. Likely another Steele sister.

He’d heard Sal say they were all former or current law enforcement, and Teagan had likely called them here before he subdued her. He had to get the Contis moving and fast. Stop these women from getting inside. The men would have to get the goods out of here or Drew’s undercover assignment would abruptly end

before they could find the source for the stolen antiquities.

Drew had invested too much of his life to let that happen. He'd go down swinging if he had to.

Anything short of committing grievous bodily harm and murder.

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