

Excerpt from Safe from the Flames

“Ma’am, can you hear me?” Unwinding a green scarf from her head, masses of wavy red hair tumbled into his gloved hands. “Ma’am, are you hurt?” He yanked off his helmet, throwing it to the ground and did the same with the heavy gloves. He brushed his fingers over her cheeks, which were cool to the touch, and streaked with soot. “Talk to me.” Darren leaned closer and put an ear to her chest. Her heartbeat was strong and steady. Nothing like he would have expected from a woman who’d just been through a traumatic fire. He lifted his head, scanned the area for the EMTs “Medic!”

Relief surged through him as effective as a rush of air conditioning when she stirred. He always hated losing at the rescue game. Nothing crushed his spirit more than reaching a body and realizing they were dead upon arrival. When her gaze met his, it pinned him in depths so blue he could almost feel their coolness.

Time slowed down for him in that one moment, and it seemed that destiny barreled into him with the force of a Mack truck. He felt as if his entire life had been training for this moment, but he couldn’t explain why.

He shot to his feet when a couple EMTs arrived, jostling for position around the woman.

“Move Kaestle. We need to work.”

“She’s fine, no smoke inhalation, and no burns, just exhausted. Better keep an eye on her just in case.”

“Yeah, we got it. You did your job now let us do ours.”

As he gazed down at her face, saw the splash of freckles over her cheeks and nose, he made a spur of the moment decision. Like the gut instincts that had saved his life countless times during countless jobs, that same unexplainable feeling told him this woman needed his help. He didn’t understand it, but there was no way in hell he would ignore it either.

Kneeling down, regardless of the annoyed looks from the medical personnel, he smoothed the sweaty hair back from her forehead. “What’s your name?” The pale flesh of her exposed midriff as her tank top rode up drew his gaze. He quelled the urge to touch her with less than professional attachment. *Not appropriate, Kaestle.* “Any identification?”

One of the EMT workers shook his head. “Nope.”

Darren frowned as his gaze raked the legs of her snug jeans. “What’s your name?” This time, his request was more forceful.

“Hadyn Bernson”

“Hi, Hadyn. I’m Darren. You’re gonna be just fine.”

Her fingers gripped his arm so hard he could feel them dig into his skin through the heaviness of his coat. “Please don’t take me to the hospital. They won’t understand what I am.” Her lips twitched as if she intended to smile, but then her eyelids fluttered closed and she fainted with a tiny sigh.

The first emergency worker detached her fingers from his arm. “Sorry, sir, we have to get her to the hospital now.”

“Sure. Sorry.” Darren stepped out of the way as the EMTs lifted her body onto a stretcher. “Which one? Which hospital?” Once he had the vital information, he nodded and promised himself he would drop by for a visit. He wanted to know why she was so adamant that she not end up under professional care.