

Zoe and Charlie ran to the front of the group to reach Daniel as the building in front of them spewed smoke from its windows.

“Get them back,” shouted Daniel to Mrs Robinson, as he started to run towards the door.

“Dad, wait!” she called out.

She and Charlie caught up to him in a matter of seconds.

“Get back with the class,” he demanded.

“Fat chance,” said Zoe “If you go in, I go in. You can’t stop me,”

Daniel stared at her in frustration, jaw clenched tight and a vein popping angrily over his brow.

“Fine. You,” he said pointing at Charlie “Call the fire brigade, no alarms are working so something’s wrong.”

Charlie pulled out her phone and started talking quickly in Japanese.

“And you,” he said poking her in the chest “No higher than the third floor. If the door is locked, leave it and move on. If the handle is hot, do not enter. Don’t go any higher and don’t take any chances. Do you understand?”

“Yes dad,” she said.

She could hear Mrs Robinson shouting behind her, but tuned her out easily as her father opened the door to the lobby.

The ground floor was quiet and clean. A small desk occupied by a bored looking young man was tucked away in the far corner. He looked up in surprise as Daniel, Zoe and Charlie burst through the front door.

Charlie shouted something at him as they crossed the floor quickly and headed towards the stairway.

Daniel shot up the stairs with lightning speed and disappeared above them. Taking the stairs two at a time, Zoe and Charlie followed as fast as they could, their footsteps echoing off the hard cement.

Seeing a large 3 on the wall, Zoe shouldered her way through the stairwells door and rushed onto the landing. Everything seemed calm and normal. A pot plant with a peace lily sat under the window on each side of the building. There was no smoke, no screams. Nothing to indicate a fire had broken out at all.

Had they got the wrong building?

Zoe grabbed the handle of the door closest to her and let go with a yelp. It was burning hot and her hand throbbed from the brief contact.

*“If it’s hot, leave it and move on,”* came her fathers voice.

She took a step towards the next door then stopped. If it’s hot then there is fire on the other side. Someone could be trapped inside.

How could she move on?

She stepped back to the door and stared at the handle.

“What are you doing?” said Charlie.

Zoe turned on the spot and her eyes locked on a deep red canister fixed to the wall.

She rushed over and grabbed it, the steel cool against her scalded palm, then hurried over to the door. Lifting it up with both hands, she brought the base down on the handle. It snapped off and clattered to the floor. Putting her shoulder against the door, she pushed hard and flung it inwards.

Heat slapped her face, instantly setting her skin tingling.

Barely a meter from the door a towering inferno raged, belching smoke out into the landing. Zoe pointed the extinguisher at the base of the flames and squeezed the trigger. A cloud of white mist shot from the hose and the fire disappeared temporarily.

Pulling her collar over her mouth and nose, she ran into the lounge room. A tiny kitchen spread across the far side of the apartment with two closed doors on the left.

She ran over and opened one revealing a pristine bathroom. Moving quickly to the remaining door, she pushed it open and found a wide eyed couple staring up at her from a floor bed.

“Get up! We need to go!” shouted Zoe.

They clutched at each other and tried to shuffle away from her. Zoe ran her fingers around the door frame and felt the bump for a light switch. She flicked it and light flooded the room.

Pointing towards the smoke that was filling the room she shouted “Fire! Run!”

This time they seemed to understand.

The couple scrambled to their feet and rushed past Zoe towards the landing.

Zoe followed them and found Charlie standing stock still at the entrance to the apartment. Her hand was curled around the door frame and her eyes stared straight into nothing.

*Shock* thought Zoe.

What could she do?

“Charlie we need to move,” said Zoe.

Charlie didn’t react.

Zoe shook her roughly but still she stared into the distance.

Not knowing what else to do, she dropped the fire extinguisher, grabbed Charlies face in her hands and kissed her.

Even amidst the chaos of the fire and smoke, she could taste a hint of strawberry on her lips and feel the silky folds of Charlies hair rolling through her fingers.

Pulling back, she saw Charlie open her eyes and look at her.

“We need to keep going, are you with me or not?” said Zoe, letting her go and rushing over to the far door.

This time when she smashed the handle off Charlie went in first. There was no fire in this apartment and Zoe heard her conversing in rapid Japanese with the occupant.

“Let’s go!” shouted Zoe.

An old man hobbled out with Charlie supporting his elbow.

“Get him to the bottom floor, I’ll start on the next level,” said Zoe as she disappeared into the stairwell.

A haze of smoke greeted her on level two. Coughing and sputtering, she smashed the handle off the first door and shouldered her way in. Heat forced her back as flames licked inwards onto the landing.

She shot the extinguisher into the blaze but the fire absorbed it then flared back at her. There was no way she could make it through that.

*I hope no one was home.*

Zoe turned her attention to the other door and smashed her way in. Smoke had filled the entire room and she struggled to breathe as she groped her way through the darkness. Something tangled her legs and she fell over the couch, hitting her head as she fell. Lights flashed in her vision as she forced herself to her feet and lurched towards the door.

*If I pass out, I’m dead.*

Zoe flicked the light on as she entered only to see an empty bed. Grunting in frustration she left the room and opened the bathroom.

A woman lay sprawled across the floor in a grey tracksuit. Long black hair plastered across her face and covered in sweat.

Dropping to her knees, Zoe wrapped the woman's arms around her neck then forced herself to her feet. The room swam in front of her and smoke stung her eyes as she stumbled across the room. She followed the edge of the room to avoid whatever had tripped her before.

When she finally made it to the door, she found the fire from the other apartment had already spread across the landing. Clenching her jaw, she approached the doorway but the heat pressed her back.

Tongues of flame licked at the door frame and started to rapidly eat up the carpeted floor. Zoe hurried backwards into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

*Now what?*

The woman on her shoulder stirred and Zoe quickly put her down in the shower cubicle.

She cast her eyes around the bathroom in search of something that could save them and came to rest on two thick robes hanging from the door above a pair of ugg boots.

Zoe pulled a gown over herself and shoved her feet into the ugg boots. Then she knelt next to the woman in the cubicle and stuffed her into the remaining dressing gown. Taking a breath to brave herself, she gripped the tap for the shower and turned the cold water to full.

Water cascaded across her neck and quickly soaked her clothes. She pulled the hood up over her head and let the water sink into the fabric before crouching down and pulling the woman into the water.

The clothes clung to her body and water sloshed across the floor as she bent down and pulled the woman back up across her shoulders in a fireman's carry. The weight and water making her stagger as she stepped towards the door.

She would have to be fast.

Heart pounding, she took a deep breath and ripped open the door.

Heat slammed her body and bit at her face. Tucking her head down into the collar of the robe, she sprinted into the apartment.

Fire covered every space imaginable like a furnace from hell.

Zoe rushed past the sofa and down the corridor. The flames had already heated her garments to an uncomfortable temperature and she was questioning her choice. Her lungs screamed for oxygen, but she knew that to breathe in would be to die.

She was out on the landing. Tiles from the ceiling littered the floor in fiery stacks of rubble.

The door to the stairwell looked so far away. She needed to breathe!

Fiery fingers clawed at her face as hands.

Moving as fast as she could, she rushed across the landing and charged into the door.

They tumbled into the stairway and Zoe almost dropped the woman as she stumbled against the wall.

Steam rose from her clothes and she was suddenly boiling hot as she gasped in a huge breath of air.

The smoke made her cough immediately but she sucked in another greedily as she tried to catch her breath.

Legs shaking under the weight of the woman, she started to work her way down the steps. A large crash from higher up in the building gave her a burst of energy and she soldiered her way to the first floor landing.

Suddenly Charlie was there. Her pale face was shouting something Zoe couldn't understand.

The weight of the woman shifted on her back as Charlie positioned the woman between them. Then she felt Charlie wrap her fist into her robes and tug her down the stairs.

Zoe followed her, happy to be led.

Finally, the large G on the ground floor door opened in front of her.

Following Charlie, she slipped and slid across the tiles and out the front door.

Blue and red lights filled the darkness, highlighting a crowd surrounding the building.

Someone took the woman from her leaving her standing alone in the middle of the chaos.

"Where's dad?" said Zoe.

"Hasn't come out yet," said Charlie "Come to the medics, you look awful,"

She let herself be led to the back of an ambulance. As she sat down the crowd started to shout, pointing up at the roof of the building.



Following their gaze she saw her fathers face peer over the edge before he stepped up onto the ledge. He stood awkwardly, his arms not leaving his torso as if he were in a straight jacket, and examined the building across.

“He’s going to jump,” said Zoe, pushing herself to her feet and grabbing the paramedic.

“Charlie, tell her to grab her kit!” shouted Zoe as she ran towards the adjacent building.

Flames had completely engulfed the apartment tower now. Streams of water were being focused through the windows as the fire fighters desperately tried to stop it from spreading to the other buildings.

She burst through the front of the adjacent building and jammed the up button on the elevator. It’s doors slid open immediately and she pushed the paramedic and Charlie in before pressing the button at the top.

As the doors slid closed she heard someone scream and saw them pointing up.

Daniel had jumped.