

Danielle Baldock

451 - LIFE, BURNING

Flames eat words faster than she can read them. If she pauses to blow on her icy fingers, whole sentences disappear.

She snatches back a black-frilled page, yelps.

His eyes flicker. What happened?

Burnt my fingers...

He smiles, kisses her hand. That's what you get for reading too slow!

She's used all their stock of firebricks, newspapers pulped and compressed into lumpy rectangles that burn with a clear blue light.

Now she starts on her precious collection of books, her least favourite first.

She holds off as long as she can, but as ice hieroglyphs the windows, and his breath grows ragged, she forces herself at last to her favourites.

She reads them aloud, murmuring as she feeds them to the hungry flames.

Images of their old life burst into being in the bare room, before they're consumed. Dreams of marshmallows and baked potatoes glow in the hissing flames.

He grows stiller, quieter, as she picks up another book.

Strokes its cover, puts it to her nose to smell the familiar papery smell. Bites her lip as she rips the first page.

She chokes then, takes a deep, deep breath, and feeds the brave precious words into the flames.