

# Hellfire

December 26

"Nooooo! Not the tickle monster!" the little boy shouted, trying in vain to squirm away.

"Are you going to put your PJs on now?"

"Okay!" His mother relented and sat the little boy up. "I want the cool ones," he said with a bright smile.

The cool PJs were his Christmas present from her in-laws and his favorite gift because they came with matching toys; the light up fire engine, ambulance, and police car currently sitting on his nightstand.

"Do you want help?"

"I can do it."

"What if mommy just starts it?"

He nodded.

With well-practiced ease, she gathered up the pant legs, putting his spindly little left foot through the left, followed by the right. His weak, underdeveloped legs were what she noticed first; her husband and even her friends told her she was paranoid, but she knew. Mothers always do. When the doctors finally confirmed her suspicion, she felt neither vindicated nor relieved; just an overwhelming sadness that her son would face a lifetime of hardship she could not love away.

"Mommy, let me finish."

"Okay baby."

She stared amazed how he, slowly, but determinedly pulled his pajama bottoms up to his waist while he used her as a support; her thick, brown hair doubling as an emergency steady.

"Can I wait up for daddy?"

"We'll see." She scooped him up and kissed his dimpled little cheeks as he squirmed. She didn't care how old he got, she vowed to herself, she would kiss them forever; his graduation, his wedding, the day her first grandchild was born...

"Mommy! Gross!"

Reluctantly, she let him go and he buried himself in his covers.

"What should we read tonight?"

"Fishes!"

She retrieved the requested book and got into bed next to her little miracle.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

As she read her little boy the story of the Ollie, the orca, and his tuna friend, Tina, she felt peaceful satisfaction. There was no day at the office, no gold-lettered plaque, no self-aggrandizing title that had ever come close to the pleasure and fulfilment she received from story time with the love of her life.

When Ollie and Tina were halfway through their journey navigating the magical kelp forest, light breathing filled the space next to her as the undersea adventure slipped seamlessly into childhood dreams.

As she gently turned off the lamp, the little boy stirred.

“Sing it,” he mumbled as his top eyelashes drifted to rejoin the bottom ones.

She drew the boy closer, his head coming to rest next to her heart.

“Precious baby, precious boy,  
My one and only, my pride and joy;  
A miracle and gift to me  
To complete our little family  
Close your eyes and sleep sound  
For mommy’s love is always around.”

The woman shut her eyes, blissfully unaware of the footsteps approaching the bedroom door. A figure cast an ominous shadow over the dozing mother and child. The figure inhaled deeply; the exhale lost in the pop pop of projectiles extinguishing a problem. The figure slipped back downstairs; their work had only begun.

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“Deke, Stu, attack it from the left,” Colin shouted.

The trio charged up the porch steps, blasting jets of water as they advanced.

The gyrating orange demon rebelled against the restraint attempts leveled at it; it roared forth, shattering glass and splintering wood.

“Col!”

Colin found himself sprawled in the front yard; his hose several feet away with burning timber lying on top of it. The demon roared, triumphant.

Deacon and Stuart heaved the remains of the home's front door off Colin, and he gingerly sat upright; Deacon waved the medics over as Stuart tended to him.

"You okay, man?"

"I don't have time for their bullshit, Stu," he looked contemptuously at the EMT running towards them. "We gotta get in there."

Colin rose shakily, and once he steadied himself, marched to the house's now open entrance as the EMT arrived at the smoldering remains which, seconds before, had pinned the determined firefighter; Deacon and Stuart rushed after him dragging the engorged hose and putting their masks back on.

The demon howled with fury as the trio entered the living room. Colin, Deacon, and Stuart were immediately consumed by the voluminous black smoke it was spewing, precious seconds ticking by as they oriented themselves. It was no use trying to advance any further, they would have to make their stand right there.

It took 45 minutes and 2 departments to vanquish the demon. When it had finally succumbed to its adversary, it revealed its devastating secret. Colin, Deacon, Stuart, and a dozen other firefighters just stared, paralyzed by the realization that someone had created the fiery demon to be guardian of their own secret.

The pugilistic remains, burned beyond recognition, were intermingled with the detritus of what used to be living room furniture. However, it was the distorted metal and melted plastic lying next to them that captured Colin's attention.

"Stu, Deke, you guys head upstairs, I'm gonna start here."

With a trepidation that professional detachment could not suppress, the two men obliged and walked up the once elegant staircase, spraying the hotspots' attempts to revive their fiendish compatriot.

Stuart turned to the left and entered what had been the master bedroom, while Deacon continued down the hall. Stuart carefully pulled back the charred duvet, praying silently that the only body he would see tonight was the one downstairs.

"Stu! Stu! STUART!" Stuart's blood ran cold at the anguish in his best friend's voice. He dropped the bedding and sprinted down the hall, running into Deacon who was leaning, near collapse, outside what looked to be a child's bedroom door, his only method of communication was manic pointing as tears streamed down his soot covered face.

Stuart looked in the direction of his shaking finger and vomited.