The Fire Demon

The sharp chime of the doorbell, right at six o'clock, made her jump. Abby was not expecting company. A reflexive fear chilled her blood. Maybe it was the dreaded door-to-door rapist and serial killer that her mother had warned her about. In her mother's warped reality, there were at least two per square mile in Los Angeles.

More likely it was another obnoxious salesman, disregarding the *NO SOLICITORS* sign posted under the bell to try to hawk rooftop solar or a new streaming service.

Abby stepped brisky from the kitchen and crossed the tiled foyer to look through the peephole. A shocker, it was Tom, her ex, slouched on the porch in gray Dockers and a navy long-sleeve jersey. He looked forlorn, his soulful eyes drooping, his dark hair dangling loosely around his ears. One hand held a pizza box, and the other a bottle of what looked like wine or champagne.

"Tom, what are you doing here?" Abby exclaimed, not unhappily, after swinging open the door. Her first reaction was excitement, but the realities of the break-up and the weeks-long schism between them quickly flooded back and squelched much of her enthusiasm.

"Hey, Abby, surprise, surprise!" he said in a nervous voice. "You can see I came ready to bribe you."

"Bribe me?"

"To let me in." He showed off the bottle as an offering.

"Yes, okay, come in," she said, moving aside for him. "But I don't understand this. What's going on?"

"Our anniversary." Tom followed as she led the way warily toward the kitchen. "What would have been our first year of going together, *if* we had *just managed to keep it together* a little longer." He fought the awkwardness with a so-damn-close inflection.

"Yeah, *if*." A wistful surge of emotion entered her voice. She thought the gesture very sweet, but she refrained from saying so. No part of her wanted to encourage a reconciliation.

"A year ago tonight," Tom said, "that's when we drove down to Redondo and ate on the pier. Remember? And afterward——"

"I know, I know." Abby stood at the center island where Tom set down the champagne and the pizza box. "Tom, listen, I don't think I can do it again. You're a great guy, we had some fun, but I just can't."

He only stared for a moment, studying her face, those luminous blue eyes that now haunted his nights. Her flawless skin. She had trimmed her silky blonde hair; it now barely reached her shoulders. "I think you're——no, listen, I'm not asking for anything," he said. "Why don't we have some pizza, mark the occasion, and then I'll leave. Good vibes, no animosity."

"Oh, a new approach?" Abby tried to sound light. "OK, but I'm going to hold you to that. Just some pizza and good vibes and I go watch Netflix." She was sure Tom's motives ran well beyond a simple contrived celebration. Still, they clicked on some levels, and too many of her nights had been spent in solitude.

She moved to a cabinet near the sink and fetched champagne flutes and paper plates.

"I got extra mushrooms and olives," he said. "Your faves."

"Nicely done." She thought he looked thinner than before. "So, you're well? Are you still at Ashton Lowe?" Tom had complained incessantly about the tedium and infighting at the small marketing firm on Melrose, where he dealt with new accounts.

"Miserable as ever, and desperately plotting my escape." He struggled with the cork of the champagne, finally popping it, while Abby lifted cheesy slices from the box. "And you?" Tom said. "Sending the idle rich to Greece and Rome?"

Abby owned a travel agency on Olympic. She responded with a line that had become a joke between them: "I can offer you a sweet deal to Patagonia." She watched him laugh; she had always liked his smile. "Where should we eat?" she said. "It's probably getting cold on the patio." Abby decided that the den might be a bad idea——inevitably, they would turn on the big-screen. Once they got absorbed in a movie, Tom would end up hanging around for hours.

"My favorite nights, when we used to have pizza, were by the fire, sitting and talking in there," he said. As if reading her mind, he added, "I'm totally fine with clearing out early——getting myself on the road home by eight."

"I don't want a long night," she said.

"Agreed. And we can sit anywhere you want——you pick."

She decided the fireplace was fine. It was in the front room of the old, four-bedroom Craftsman. There were

two big easy chairs facing it. Abby had left the heavy leather chairs exactly as they had been when her parents lived there, before they had abandoned the overcrowded Mid-Wilshire District for a luxury retirement community in Palm Springs.

Tom agreed to start the fire while she got out the folding tray tables. Lifting aside the ornate fireplace screen, he turned and, like a picky shopper selecting fruit, removed hefty split pieces of ash and hickory from the brick alcove built into the hearth. He took pains in stacking the wood to make sure the fire would draw, leaning some of the pieces at angles, spreading kindling and yellowed old newsprint on the ancient iron grate. He used a Bic lighter that was there and got the kindling going. In moments the flames were licking at the thicker logs.

Abby brought in the trays while Tom replaced the wire screen. She smiled. She loved the look of the century-old room when a fire was burning. The warm light cast a glow on the high, beamed ceiling and oak-plank floors. Otherworldly patterns formed on the stained-glass clerestory windows at the far end. Abby dimmed the Tiffany standing lamp in the corner, then shut off the brighter overhead lights.

"Did you open the flue?" she said.

"It's open."

At least Tom was competent. He had that going for him. She slipped into a chair a moment after Tom did, thinking how surreal it seemed that they were here together again, no warning, no planning on her part—just a surprise flashback to a reality that was essentially gone.

On each tray was a champagne flute and a slice of pizza on a paper plate. She watched Tom pour the *Moet & Chandon* for her. He offered a simple toast: "To us, and what might have been."

"No sadder words."

He gave her a wry smile. She sipped, suddenly feeling awkward.

Tom took a hungry bite of the pizza.

"Are you still breaking bread with the Chagall crowd?" Abby said after a moment. There was a bohemian bistro on Highland named after the artist, where Tom had begun hanging out with several colorful characters that Abby didn't like. One in particular, a woman named Tessa, was deeply into the goth culture. Her black threadbare clothing seemed more fitting for funerals than for nights on the town. She had a silver ring in her tongue and boasted of her expertise with Tarot cards and amateur sorcery.

Abby had been in the red-haired woman's disquieting presence exactly twice, and that was enough. Tom's insistence on seeing such friends had been one of the issues that drove them apart.

"That crowd, *finis*. All in the past," Tom said. "You'll be happy to hear I opted out."

"Happy, I don't know. But I'm surprised, *really* surprised. It begs a question."

"You wonder why?"

"You were pretty zealous. *Infatuated*, I would say."

"Not infatuated. And I admit it was a mistake, I misjudged them."

"Yeah?"

Tom shrugged. "Because of being curious. I found them fascinating in some respects at the beginning."

"Tessa, you mean."

"Her too. But then I started to see the other side, how *dark* they were. *Especially* Tessa, just a dark, dark personality."

"Kind of a shame you blew me off every time I tried to point that out." Abby tried to contain an involuntary flare of anger. She glared at Tom's stolid profile in the glow of the fire.

"I know, mea culpa," he said, glancing over. "Slow on the uptake."

"No, not that, just stubborn, unwilling to listen to your silly girlfriend. Now *ex*-girlfriend."

"My loss."

"Damn right. So what happened? What turned the tide for you?"

"Nothing. Just being around them. Hearing the negativity."

Abby studied him, then shifted her gaze back toward the fire. Flames danced high now and swirled and pulsated in the gaps between the logs. The deep orange intensity of the blaze was mesmerizing.

"You didn't go out with her?" Abby said.

"No, no. She *wanted* that, I think. But no, I told you, I wasn't after her."

Abby took a bite of the pizza. She asked Tom about the conflicts at his job. He vented about a co-worker named Gabe, an alleged font of misdirected grievance and impractical ideas. While Tom recounted a particular incident that stuck in his craw, Abby found herself staring at a specific spot within the fire, a flaming crevice where a piece of kindling, about seven inches long, appeared to be flopping back and forth between larger chunks of wood.

The stick, or whatever it was, had an odd shape: Jutting from its sides were thinner slivers of wood, small branches maybe, that glowed bright in the flame and seemed to be moving, like flailing arms.

"Look at that," Abby said, interrupting Tom in mid-sentence. "That thing there, it looks like a little man being burned alive."

"Where?" He watched where she was pointing. "Oh, yeah, you're right. It really does."

They stared in fascinated silence. Fire completely engulfed the piece of kindling and it seemed to contort and writhe in mute agony. A larger log emitted a sudden loud *crack*, and Tom and Abby both jumped. Seconds later, inexplicably, the writhing piece of wood lurched forward toward the fire screen—an abrupt movement of two inches or so, not much, but strange because nothing seemed to propel it. The weirdness quickly turned to shock a moment afterward when the burning figure seemed to use its tiny appendages to thrust itself another couple of inches forward.

"My God!" Abby said, recoiling.

"It's moving!" Tom shouted, bumping the tray table as he stood. He froze, eyes wide.

The wood was motionless for several seconds, then it twitched and rocked. Then came a movement that was even more clearly deliberate, a naked display of intent, as it wrenched itself free of the larger log beneath it. The flaming figure tumbled off the iron grate and lay for a moment on the bricks just inside the fire screen.

"Oh, my God!" Abby shouted.

Then the figure, still burning, raised itself into a vertical stance, as if staring at Abby and Tom through the mesh.

"Oh, my *GOD*!" Abby shrieked again, knocking over her tray, spilling the champagne and pizza onto the floor, as she scrambled to move away.

"That fucking thing's *alive*!" Tom shouted, swallowing hard. High voltage seemed to surge down his spine. His heart pounded.

Abby screamed again, pointing and stepping farther back. "Tom, watch out! It's still moving!"

Tom gasped for air. He was stunned to realize that the figure appeared to be a tiny man, still enveloped in flame. He could now see discernable features: an eyeless head, a neck, torso, arms and legs, all aflame and glowing red like charcoal. The little burning arms took hold of the fire screen. The creature began to climb.

"*What the fuck*!" Tom screamed. He bounded toward the hearth and grabbed the iron poker from the rack of dangling fireplace tools.

"Tom! Tom! *It's trying to get out*!" Abby cried.

The thing was nearly to the top of the screen. Tom whipped the poker around and smashed it against the screen mesh. It knocked the figure loose and it fell back to the bricks, but it immediately started climbing again.

Tom advanced and gave it another whack, this time knocking the screen over. Free suddenly, the burning creature scrambled toward Tom with startling speed, crossing a small section of floor and grasping the cuff of Tom's pants. The heat of it scorched Tom's shin as the thing shimmied frantically upward toward his knee. Tom leapt and screamed and smashed it with the poker, knocking it to the floor again.

"Get something!" he shouted to Abby.

"Get *what*?" Her voice became shrill.

"Broom! Baseball bat—*something*!" Tom leapt back as the thing recovered. "Bring a trash can, we'll trap it!" The creature scrambled and attacked again, like a rabid animal, seizing Tom's right ankle. He felt the heat scorch him through his sock. Tom yelled and knocked it with the poker, then kicked it hard.

"I'll try to get it outside!" He bolted toward the front entryway and flung open the door.

Abby was in the kitchen, grabbing the plastic wastebasket from under the sink. Her hands shook uncontrollably.

Tom glanced back from the front porch, expecting the figure to be trailing him. He didn't see it.

"Watch out, it's still loose!" Tom shouted. Was it after Abby now? He wheeled and dashed to the kitchen, but the thing wasn't there, either. Tom rushed back to the hearth in time to see it scamper up the burning logs and disappear up the flue.

Abby rushed in with the wastebasket.

"It went up!" Tom said, pointing, gasping for breath.

"The chimney?"

"I don't know if we can get at it."

"Jesus Christ, we've got to kill it, whatever the hell it is." Abby's voice had gained a steely edge. She stood staring.

"I'll see if it came out the top." Tom rushed out front and stood on the sloping lawn, trying to see the top of the chimney. The whitewashed bricks rose from the second-floor roof, far enough back and deep enough in the

shadows that he could see only the north side of it. If the thing crawled out, and if it was still burning—two big ifs—he would probably spot it, unless it was already gone. Hard to know if it was still in the chimney or had slipped away.

Tom kept watching a long while before giving up and heading back inside. Abby maintained a terrified vigil on the diminishing fire, but from across the room. She didn't dare even sit down.

"I don't see how I can stay here tonight," she said.

"Where do you plan to go?"

"Nowhere. I *have* to stay." Her eyes radiated a Death Row sort of fear. "If I leave and it comes out again, it might burn the house down."

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Abby's fingers were still too jittery for the laptop keyboard; she had to rely on Siri. A dozen or so searches suggested that the fire creature was some sort of demon, a dark spirit that was able, somehow, to manipulate the physical elements around it.

It made as much sense as anything, but she wasn't sold. Abby had never bought into supernatural hocus-pocus. Still, what she had seen could not be explained, that was for sure. Tom reminded her that even the Stones had sung about fire being the devil's friend.

They were seated together on an emerald-green loveseat against the far wall, still watching the dead hearth. Tom had doused the flames and closed both flues: This one as well as the flue upstairs in the fireplace of the master bedroom. They had turned on all the lights and stacked mounds of books against the mesh screen, a further barrier to invasion.

At eleven they heard the dulcet tones of an old grandfather clock, a period feature of the room, breaking a tense silence. Abby looked suddenly at Tom and said, "Could you have put that thing in there?"

"What thing? That demon?"

"You stacked the firewood. You came here totally out of the blue to see me and—what? Unleash that horror? Scare the hell out of me?"

"Whoa! No fucking way. Not a chance! Remember it tried to attack me."

"Then where did it come from?" she demanded.

"My God, Abby, where do you think I'd even get something like that? You're thinking I smuggled it in here? Hid it inside the pizza box?"

"Just tell me you didn't."

"You're tired——tired and scared. You should try to sleep."

"I can't."

"Let's go upstairs. Just to rest. We don't have to do anything."

Abby thought about it and relented. Hours had gone by without the demon reappearing. Maybe it had fizzled out, lost life without the sustenance of the fire. She stood shakily and kept a wary gaze on the fireplace as they crossed the room to the central hallway and trudged up the oak staircase.

They didn't bother undressing or turning off the lights, just flopped across Abby's queen poster bed. Abby sidled up against Tom and he cupped a hand on her shoulder. They spoke in low tones about the ghastly shock of it, the way the thing looked and moved, the same terrified impressions they had shared downstairs. In a while Tom could hear Abby's breathing grow steadier, deeper. He realized that her earlier complaint was untrue——she was in fact able to drift off to sleep.

Tom was still too wired. He lay on his back, aware of the thudding of his heart. He focused his eyes on the ceiling beams, the white-painted grains of the wood. Tom stayed on high alert, like an edgy rottweiler. Faint sounds of the outside world penetrated his awareness——a distant police siren, traffic horns, the barking of a dog. Time dragged by until he glanced at a bedside clock and saw it was 2:18 a.m.

Scenes kept unfolding in Tom's mind: the fire creature, the demon, wriggling up his shin.

Bashing it with the poker.

Seeing it escape up the flue.

Abby's face as she screamed.

Tom's heard a sudden noise from downstairs. Then a muffled crashing sound. He gasped and looked over, saw Abby still asleep, and as softly as possible swung his feet to the floor.

His heart raced as he padded to the stairs and soundlessly descended. Lights were still on in the main room. He was startled to find the fireplace screen toppled over, the books scattered on the floor. Tom sucked in a breath. He looked about wildly for the demon. There was no sign of it, no sign of movement.

Stepping slowly toward the kitchen, Tom tried to remember if Abby had left the lights on in there. He thought she had. The room was now dark. He could see the outline of the center island, its marble surface faintly gleaming. He braced his hands against it and tried to remember where the light switch was.

The sink, maybe. Near the sink. Tom carefully maneuvered around the island, then suddenly stopped, leapt backward. There it was, the demon, on the floor below the sink, smoldering like an ember: a deep, pulsating red-orange. It had got back in somehow, probably by forcing its way past the closed flue. The thing stood upright but looked half-dead, unmoving. Tom froze, staring, trying to decide how to get rid of it, but in an instant it regained life. The fire flared and it bounded swiftly, leaping and catching Tom at the waist, propelling itself still higher.

The heat hit Tom like a knife blade.

He screamed and grabbed at it, burning his hands.

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Abby awoke with a jolt, reaching out, feeling no one. Had she heard Tom scream? Or dreamed it?

Guttural groans followed—*Tom*!—and a commotion. A stifled cry for help. Violent noises from downstairs.

"Tom!" Abby yelled, scrambling out of bed, rushing down. She flipped on the kitchen lights and found him sprawled on his back, unconscious. His mouth was open. Tom's dark jersey appeared to have char marks around the neck, and his chin and lips and nose all looked badly burned.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Abby repeated like a mantra, kneeling beside him. She determined that he wasn't breathing, and she tried to give mouth-to-mouth. His lips felt blistered. She couldn't revive him and rushed for her phone and dialed 9-1-1.

Horror filled her as she resumed her attempt to resuscitate him. CPR wasn't working. Abby trembled, fighting back tears, but kept at it until at last the siren came and the paramedics charged inside and took over. They asked Abby to move back and she stepped out to the front porch and sat, tears streaking her face. Poor Tom, poor dear Tom.

Was the demon still in the house somewhere, lurking? Would it attack again?

A police black-and-white rolled to the curb. Two officers stepped out and hurried past her, into the house.

Abby couldn't quite make out the conversation inside. The taller cop, lanky and dour, soon returned to the porch and introduced himself as Sgt. Len Vasquez. He asked if she was the one who had reported the emergency.

Abby nodded, a knot in her throat. "Is he gone?"

"He's dead," Vasquez said quietly. "You were with him alone? Was anyone else here?"

She shook her head, her face crumpling.

Vasquez watched her reactions carefully while maintaining a professional tone.

"I want to ask you, but I want you to understand: You don't have to answer. You can stay silent. You can have an attorney present when we talk, all right?"

"I understand," Abby said.

"What I'd like," the cop said, "is if you can just tell me what happened. Can you do that?"

Abby stared at him. She sat without speaking and took a ragged breath.