

Hell's Unveiling

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On earth, it seemed that peace reigned at Angel's Café and foster home for troubled children located in Wellington, New Zealand. In hell, the devil was plotting. An electrical fault would do nicely he figured. He would aim for maximum chaos. The chosen wire ran behind Daniel's bedroom.

One fateful evening the devil told one of his minions to take the form of a rat and chew through the plastic coating on the wire. It began to spark. A small conflagration began and soon grew into a larger flame. Thirteen year old Daniel was asleep in his bed. The fire inside the wall gathered force and flames crept into the room where Daniel lay sleeping, flickering around his head. He did not wake up – he was in a deep slumber, dreaming of white rabbits with crosses for eyes. He began to dream he was in a sauna with the heat slowly being cranked up to maximum. He tossed and turned in his bed and pushed the blankets off with his feet. Starting to sweat, he woke up, thinking he needed a drink of water. It was then he noticed the flames that were blocking his exit, leaping across the doorway, brilliant tongues of orange.

He grabbed his skateboard and wrapped a blanket around himself to protect his skin from the flames. His next thought was to help Sally who he thought might be in danger. Everybody was overly protective of Sally because she seemed so vulnerable; if she was in danger she couldn't cry out because she was mute. Or so most people thought. The others had all got out and were waiting outside under a pine tree. Sally was a heavy sleeper and she might not wake in the case of a fire. He plunged through the flame and it burnt him badly, singeing the skin on his legs and torso. He still kept going to get to Sally's room. Scooping her up, blankets and all, he helped her, stumbling, down the stairs, his skin stinging. He placed Sally, who was starting to panic, under the pine tree with the others and told her to stay put, then raced back to wake Marsha.

Marsha, who had been dreaming of rats with devil's horns, awoke with a start and, when told of what had happened, ran to get the fire extinguisher from the kitchen. She turned the white foam on the flame to quench it and it went out. She could still see fire beyond so she ran to call the fire brigade. They raced to the scene and doused the rest of the flame. Marsha raced to Daniel's side to check the extent of his injuries.

"Don't fuss," said Daniel, who didn't want anybody making a scene.

"I'll call an ambulance," Marsha announced.

"Don't be melodramatic", Daniel countered. "I'll be fine. I'm not badly burnt. I've escaped relatively unscathed."

“You’re such a good boy,” Marsha said to Daniel. “Thank God for you. You’ve saved us.”

Marsha walked across to the pine tree to check that the other children were okay. They were badly shaken but unharmed. Marsha gave a sigh of relief.

“I’m so glad you’re all okay”, she declared.

Marsha then turned her attention to the house. She surveyed the damage. Two entire walls would have to be replaced – the wall between Daniel’s room and Sally’s room and his room and the hallway. Luckily the house was insured and it would still be able to be lived in while it was being repaired.

Marsha filled out her insurance claim online. She had no way of knowing that the devil had planted more than one of his minions in the insurance company. The company sent a female insurance assessor to the house to take photos and to document Marsha’s version of events. She carried a black satchel with a white inverted pentagram on it. Marsha did not like the assessor who she noticed sprayed themselves with a perfume called Sulphur. The assessor told Marsha that she wanted to view Daniel’s room alone and that Marsha could not accompany her inside.

Three weeks later Marsha was called in to talk to the head of the insurance company. She fixed her hair in place, applied her lipstick and dressed in her best outfit but she could not control the butterflies in her stomach. She felt

guilty though she knew she had done nothing wrong. It was the way the assessor had made her feel.

Two men sat laughing together as Marsha walked into the office, stopping abruptly as she entered. They gave her the once over. Not even getting up, the man on the left held out his hand for Marsha to shake.

"Hello I'm Gordon Latimer, CEO of Inferno Insurance – a pertinent name with your case. And this is Timothy Simpson, the company lawyer."

He laughed at his own joke.

"Please, take a pew."

He gestured towards an empty chair. Marsha sat down, trying not to feel like she was in the principal's office.

"So," she said. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Before we begin, tell us Marsha, what do you do for a living?"

"I run a foster home called Marsha Lee's Home for Emerging Angel's."

"Oh," said the CEO as the lawyer took notes, "so you run a house for delinquents, do you?"

"Look," said Marsha. "Can we just get to the point please."

"It's about your case. There seem to be a few inconsistencies in the version of events that you have presented to us."

"I've told nothing but the truth so I don't know what you're talking about."

Gordon took out a manila folder full of photographs from his briefcase and laid them one by one in front of Marsha. The first photo that Marsha saw was a shot of under the bed in Daniel's room – a bottle of lighter fluid, a lighter and some matches. The next snap was of *The Arsonist Magazine* published by Burning House Press, lying on the floor near the end of Daniel's bed. The third and final photo was a shot of the single 'The Roof is on Fire' inside his CD player.

"Daniel doesn't own this junk," said Marsha, springing to his defense. "I vacuumed his room at the start of the week and there was nothing like this in there."

"Well these are the photos that the insurance assessor that we sent to your house took."

"I knew there was something fishy about her," said Marsha. "I should have followed her into the room. This evidence has been planted. I'm the victim of a setup."

"I suggest you take this seriously. Fraud is a jailable offense that could also carry a hefty financial penalty."

He tapped his teeth with his pen.

"However, we can make this all seem like a bad dream. Yes, we can make it all go away if you agree to just one thing."

"And what would that be?" asked Marsha.

"We ask only that you turn your charges over to us for safekeeping. They will be well cared for at the Unhallowed Halls Home For Healthy Humans or U quadruple H as we

like to call it. Yes, just give us the kids and we can sweep this whole sordid affair under the carpet.”

“No way,” exclaimed Marsha. “I’m not letting those kids out of my sight. They’re precious to me. God only knows what you’d do to them.”

“Don’t be so silly. We wouldn’t touch a hair on their heads. They’d be perfectly safe with us.”

“What do you want them for anyway?”

“We just want to....to train them.”

“Train them for what exactly?”

“That’s our business. They will be well looked after. Fed the finest food, they will sleep on sheets of Egyptian cotton and bathe in lavender scented waters. They will dream only sweet dreams. No nightmares shall taint their slumber.”

Somehow Marsha didn’t find this terribly reassuring. In fact, she felt decidedly uneasy and looked around for the nearest door, hoping to beat a hasty retreat.

“Look,” she said. “Let’s wrap this up, let’s cut to the chase. Can we sort this out here, or shall I bring my lawyer in to talk to you?”

“Oh,” mocked Gordon. “Getting all threatening now are we. Just you be careful how you proceed, missy, least the whole thing blow up in your face.”

Marsha had had enough. She rose to her feet and stormed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Two weeks later Marsha received a letter in the mail, summoning Daniel to court. She was furious. She had thought that the men were just full of bluster and that the charges would be dropped – she had not thought that they would proceed with anything serious. However, it seemed that they meant business. Marsha walked down the hallway to Daniel's bedroom. He was sitting on the end of his bed with his head in his hands, looking down in the dumps. Given that she could sense his despondent mood, Marsha was loathe to break the bad news to him, but she knew that he would have to tell him sooner or later. She took a deep breath and said "Daniel, I've something important to tell you."

He didn't look up.

"Yeah, what gives," he mumbled.

"You're a suspect in an arson case. You need to take this seriously. It's to do with the burning down of this place. You're to appear in court in five days time. You'll need to make yourself look smart. You won't be able to wear your baggy skating clothes. I will come with you and support you. Hopefully the two of us can successfully face the adversary together because I believe in your innocence. I believe they planted the evidence, they framed you and they are making you into a scapegoat. It's not okay. They are evil men. We can't let them win."

"Evil sounds right. I didn't start no fire. I might be naughty but I ain't *that* bad. I would never do anything to harm

Angel's Café. This place is a home to me, a haven, the only home I've ever known. I'll go to court and tell the truth. The judge will have to believe me, he'll see the honesty in my eyes."

"Okay we'll go together, let's go shopping for some smart clothes."

Marsha rang legal aid and chose a smart young lawyer named Elizabeth Saunders who she thought would be best able to represent Daniel. Elizabeth had graduated from law school four years previously, and was hungry for action.

The big day rolled around. Daniel was so nervous he vomited in the morning and Marsha had to make him a drink of lemon and ginger to soothe his stomach. On the morning of the case, Marsha received a phone call at home saying that Elizabeth had come down with a bad bout of vomiting diarrhea. They were appointed a lawyer from the public pool. His name was Ramsay Rutledge and he had a fat stomach and carried his briefcase hanging open with papers falling out of it, unprofessionally. Needless to say, he did not create a good first impression. He did nothing to calm Daniel's frayed nerves.

"How can we win with a loser like that on our case?" Daniel hissed to Marsha.

"Shhh, he'll hear you," said Marsha in a low voice. "We don't want to put him off his game."

Marsha and Daniel walked into the courtroom with their lawyer. Once inside they saw Gordon and Timothy greasing up to the judge.

Timothy dominated the courtroom proceedings with his hotshot legal terminology. Ramsay could hardly get a word in and Marsha and Daniel could tell he seemed afraid of Timothy and what he was capable of. In the end the jury only took half an hour to decide that Daniel was guilty of arson, and although it was hopelessly unfair and unjust that was what the court had decided. Daniel was sentenced to one year in a juvenile detention centre in Wellington. The judge also stated that Daniel was a danger to Marsha's other foster children so he would not be allowed back to live with Marsha ever. Marsha held back her tears – she did not want Timothy and Gordon to see her in a state of weakness. She wanted to stay strong for Daniel.

Once she had returned home, Marsha allowed herself to burst into tears. She buried her head in the pillow in her bedroom and sobbed at the thought of Daniel, whom she had tried so hard to save, being wrenched away from her bosom and back into the cruel, cold world. A juvenile detention centre! What could be crueler? For his part, Daniel had gone very quiet, withdrawn into some distant corner of himself, where nobody could reach him or hurt him. He walked in through the doors of the house and went straight to his room, buried himself underneath the duvet and would not come out for two days. Marsha had

to take his meals in to him and even then he just picked at them and barely seemed to eat.

Two weeks later Daniel had to pack his bags in preparation for the detention centre. Marsha had received a pamphlet in the post informing her that she could visit once per week only. She had vision of talking to her son through a pane of glass like in prison movies. Daniel got into the passenger seat of the car, Marsha hopped into the driver's side and they drove silently to the juvenile detention facility. Once there they had to fill out some forms and then Daniel was shown to his room which he had to share with another boy called Rig. Rig was six four and built like a tank. The first thing he asked Daniel was "So, do you play rugby?" When Daniel replied "No, I skate" Rig refused to talk to him for a month.

Marsha drove slowly home, hoping that Daniel would be okay. Upon her arrival at Angel's Café she was pleasantly surprised to find that Sally had whipped up a big batch of cream cheese and chocolate muffins. Marsha was starving and she ate two.

The devil was pleased with the outcome.