

Dad and son, 14, both died trapped in burning Tesla after its electronic door handles failed, stricken mother's lawsuit alleges

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By [ALYSSA GUZMAN, US NEWS REPORTER](#)

A father and son died after becoming trapped inside a burning **Tesla** when a system malfunction allegedly prevented the electronic door handles from releasing, according to a lawsuit.

Margarrett Smith, 35, and his son, Karter Breon Smith, 14, were driving down Georgia Highway 35 in Thomasville in a Tesla Model 3, when the vehicle 'abruptly departed the road, struck a tree, and burst into flames,' on December 23, 2024, according to documents seen by the Daily Mail.

Margarrett had picked up his son in **Florida**, and the pair had been driving back to his home in Georgia to spend **Christmas** together, his mother told the **Tallahassee Democrat**.

Before leaving, the teenager gave his mother a hug and a kiss goodbye after placing his bags in the trunk of the car.

The pair never made it to Atlanta, as Margarrett lost control of the vehicle, veering off into a pecan orchard, where it struck a tree and burst into flames, the outlet reported.

'They were asleep when it happened, and it was instant,' Karter's mother, Shantorria Herring, who filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the car maker, told the outlet.

The pair were unable to get out of the car, despite a witness rushing to help them, because the 'handles on the doors were inoperable,' the lawsuit said.

As a result, both were burned to death.



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Margarrett Smith, 35, and his son, Karter Breon Smith, 14, burned to death inside a Tesla Model 3 after the father lost control of the vehicle and hit a tree



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Margarrett had picked up his son in Tallahassee and they were driving back to his home in Atlanta to spend Christmas together when the crash occurred

The boy's mother filed a wrongful death lawsuit on behalf of her deceased son, claiming Tesla allowed a 'defective' vehicle to enter the market that was 'unreasonably dangerous for its ordinary and intended purposes.'

Herring argued that the vehicle's Autopilot system should have corrected its course and prevented it from leaving the road and striking a tree after Margarrett fell asleep at the wheel.

She added that the car's lithium battery and electrical power storage system were also defective and were 'not crashworthy and was prone to cause a post-collision thermal runaway and fire,' the lawsuit said.

Tesla batteries are **known to be troublesome to fire departments** and nearly impossible to put out due to it generating heat.

'Had the battery pack of the subject vehicle not been designed in a defective condition that was unreasonably dangerous for its intended purpose, plaintiff's son would not have been killed in the post-collision thermal runaway and fire...' the lawsuit read.

She also said the car's inability to be opened from the outside, due to it relying on electrical power with no mechanical backup, resulted in her son and his father's deaths.

'Tesla failed to warn consumers, including the father of plaintiff's decedent, that the Tesla Model 3 was not crashworthy and was unreasonably dangerous in the foreseeable event of a crash,' the lawsuit said.

'Rather than warnings about its safety record, Tesla disseminated marketing information to the consuming public, which represented that the Model 3 and other vehicles in its lineup were crashworthy safe for their intended purposes.'



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Despite a witness trying to help them, the car's door handle (stock image) didn't work and the inside of the car was allegedly inaccessible, a lawsuit claimed

Herring is seeking punitive damages in an unspecified amount, her attorney fees, and \$15,500 for funeral expenses.

The Daily Mail has reached out to Herring's lawyers and Tesla for comment.

The family remembers Karter as a 'vibrant and spirited young soul' who 'left this world far too soon,' his obituary read.

'Karter's infectious smile and boundless energy touched the lives of everyone who had the privilege to know him.'

Karter was an excellent student, who kept straight-A's and had a 'passion for sports.' He was an avid soccer player and also enjoyed basketball, track, and football.

'He wanted to be a basketball player,' the mother told the Tallahassee Democrat. 'But I always reiterated how important academics was.'

'Karter was going to be amazing whatever he did and whatever he decided to do because he put his all into it.'



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The family remembers Karter has a vibrant soul, who touched the lives around him. He was also a straight-A student and enjoyed playing sports



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Karter had dreams of being a basketball player and also enjoyed soccer and track

He also enjoyed spending time with his sister Shaliyah Jones, 20, and Vashanti Galloway, 18, his mother told the Tallahassee Democrat. And he often spent his weekends hanging out with friends.

Margarrett was a graduate of Florida A&M University and had been pursuing a doctorate degree at the time of the incident.

He had also started to help run his family's trucking company at the time, the mother said.