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THE CURIOUS MAP

By Morgan Mayfield

As we frantically scouted the neighborhood for my six-year-old daughter, I could hear the voices of our neighbors calling out in unison, like a twisted musical round:

"Frankie? Frankie, where are you?"

I took a few steps, feeling like I was walking through the thickest smog. Frankie had been missing for three days now, mysteriously vanishing from her bedroom with her favorite stuffed turtle. Today is already ninety degrees at eight in the morning. The uneasiness I had felt the day before had morphed into a full-body clenching, chest-tightening panic. Seventy-two *excruciating* hours had passed, and I could not comprehend it.

I was so worried about her being somewhere, scared and afraid of the dark. My poor baby. Frankie hated sleeping without her nightlight; she always said the dark felt "too big." I used to leave the hall light on just in case she needed to find me.

Now lost in thought, I stared at the clear turquoise sky, watching birds glide freely overhead. Warm goosebumps formed on my skin as time seemed to blur, and I imagined soaring with the birds. For the first time since this nightmare began, I felt an uncanny calm wash over me, almost peaceful. I tried to hold onto the sensation, breathing in deeply. But as I exhaled, an overwhelming wave of angst crashed over me. My head began spinning slowly, and tunnel vision closed in as the world around me warped.

"I think I'm going to pass out," I mumbled to myself.

I looked around, noticing the sky darkening and the grass withering around me. Another slow, deep breath, an attempt to fight off the breakdown I felt coming, brought my gaze back to the sky. The world around me grew brighter and brighter until I could see nothing but a flood of crimson red.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I buried my face in my hands.

"Blair?"

Startled, I opened my eyes to find everything around me back to normal.

It was not the first time he called my name.

"Blair, honey, we should go home. Maybe you can try to rest?"

I could see the worry in his eyes, but I gave no response. Soren took my hand, and we began the walk back home. I was extremely fortunate to have him in my life, especially now. He was everything I needed in a partner: loving, supportive, gentle, and fierce.

Meanwhile, I could be reserved and hasty. I had not always been the best wife, but now I was trying to be the wife he deserved.

Less than six months ago, we had rekindled our marriage: we sat on the kitchen floor while eating Chinese takeout straight from the cartons, laughing about nothing and overcoming a stormy period, and finally feeling unstoppable together. Soren reached for my hand as if it were the first time again, and I believed him when he said we were okay.

We had stopped touching long before we stopped talking, lost between bills and silence, we forgot who we were. Now life *was* beautiful.

He was my rock.

And now this.

"Do you see that?" I asked. We were about forty yards from the house, but something stuck in the door caught my eye. I quickened my pace to get a closer look. It was an old envelope, stained as if coffee had been spilled on it. I snatched it down from the door as we rushed inside. I carefully opened it, revealing a paper with symbols, worn and discolored like the envelope.

"What the hell...? Is this a map?" I held the paper up, and we both stared wide-eyed, like

deer caught in headlights.

As we examined the tattered map, a sudden, eerie chill settled in. The map was not random; it had markings I vaguely recognized but could not place. Soren glanced at me, his brow furrowing, but the unsettling feeling crawling up my spine would not shake.

Suddenly, my breath caught. I remembered something. Those symbols, I had seen them before. In an old book Soren used to keep locked away in his office, a book he had promised he would never touch again. As I turned to run into his office for verification, he quickly followed in slight confusion. Hastily dismantling his shelf of papers and books, I found exactly the one I needed. Before I had to flip too far, I spotted one of the symbols matching the map.

I whipped around to face him. "Soren, what is this? I thought you stopped all of this!"

His eyes widened, but he ceased to respond. Instead, he turned pale, visibly shaken. "I... I had no idea it would lead to this. I thought I had control." His voice cracked. "I only wanted to save us...I love you so much."

Wow. I *thought* Soren was my rock. But rocks don't break this easily. So what had he really done?

Soren fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face. "I thought I could fix it. I wanted to fix us," he whispered. "You were already gone, even when you were standing right in front of me. I thought if I could just change something, I could bring you back to me. I thought I could bargain with him."

My heart raced as pieces of a dark puzzle began to fit into place. Frankie did not just vanish; she was the victim of an abduction. And it was no ordinary abduction. She was the *price*, the consequence of Soren recklessly dabbling with dark magic.

But there was no more bargaining. Frankie was lost, a pawn in a game Soren never fully

understood.

As I spun around to gather reasoning, my heart skipped a beat. In disbelief, I stormed into the living room, where my new prison is my reading chair in front of the window facing the street.

Was this *my* fault?

If I hadn't pulled away and just stayed more present, would he have ever gone looking for answers like that?

At some point, I dozed off. I have no recollection of the time, yet I know I have been asleep for some hours because the sun is setting. That was the first time I slept in days, even just a few hours. The result of said rest was a wave of emotions as I took a crash landing back into my new reality, a bonus to my throbbing headache.

I stood in the kitchen with my glass of water, wondering how I ended up here. It all felt so unreal. I was walking over to the window when I saw a shadow figure at my doorstep.

Had they knocked?

"Hello?"

It was silent, yet I could still see the figure standing there, so I opened the door.

There she was.

My Frankie, seemingly unharmed. She looked as she had before she vanished: wide-eyed, clutching her favorite stuffed turtle. Relief flooded over, and without thought, I quickly pulled her inside. Soren must have heard the commotion and stumbled from the bedroom, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Frankie!" I cried, tears streaming down my face. I threw my arms around her, pulling her close.

She smelled real. She felt real. However, as I held her, a strange unease crept in. Something was not right. She was holding her turtle upside down by the flipper. She hated holding it that way, playing into the idea that the turtle had real feelings; she always said it liked to be cuddled instead.

"Mom," she said quietly, her voice soft but hollow, "I am fine now. It's over."

Soren joined us in our embrace, his eyes filled with tears of relief. But as we embraced her, something felt off and unnaturally still, like Frankie was not quite there. I pulled back again, this time with a gnawing sense of concern.

"Frankie... is something wrong? What happened? Where were you? What's over?"

Too rapid-fire for a child I know, but I begged to know, my heart thudding in my chest.

Frankie smiled sweetly, far too composed for a six-year-old. Then her smile widened, unnervingly wide. Her head tilted, and her eyes, once filled with childlike innocence, suddenly gleamed with something darker.

"Oh, Mom... There is nothing wrong. Verily, everything is just how it is supposed to be."

Before I could react, her eyes flashed a vivid, unnatural red. Her body began to tremble and then distort, her small hands turning claw-like, her skin darkening, rippling with something sinister surfacing.

I gasped, stumbling backward, unable to process what I was seeing.

Suddenly, my legs gave way beneath me as the truth hit like a freight train: Frankie did not just wander off. She had somehow been summoned, stolen by the very demons Soren had unwittingly mustered with his dark practices.

Now Frankie, or whatever was pretending to be her, chuckled softly, the sound low and guttural, completely inhuman.

"Oh, you see... I have never really been Frankie." Her voice deepened and grew more menacing with each word. "Frankie is gone. And now, you finally get to meet me."

I was horrified. I didn't understand. Never Frankie?

The demon wearing Frankie's face stepped forward, grinning. "All those little spells you played with, Dad? You opened the portal. And I slipped right inside."

Soren fell to his knees, shaking. "No... no, this cannot be..."

The demon sighed mockingly, brushing at the tattered dress as if she were still a playful child. "Frankie was so easy to take, so innocent. And now?" She spread her arms wide, "Now, this is my body." Her form flickered with shadowy tendrils.

"I am Mephisto. I do not take children, I take what is owed."

The demon, still smiling, using Frankie's face, leaned in closer. "She is part of me and always has been. Her soul was the price your dear husband paid when he dabbled in powers far beyond his control."

As Mephisto's eyes burned brighter red, Soren and I realized with horror that our daughter was long since replaced by something far darker, far more terrifying.

"You asked for your marriage back," the demon said softly. "You asked for time. For love restored, and I gave it to you long ago."

Shaking Frankie's head as if in disbelief, "You think I left that map for you?" Mephisto laughed. "No, no... your husband brought it into this house the day *he* chose to reach out to *me*."

I quickly assessed the situation as if my brain was in a hyperdrive. I realized the map was not just a peculiar map, but instructions on navigating the depths of hell. Therefore, we would have to risk our souls and follow it, paying the price at each toll, to have a chance of getting our baby girl back.