

*For the Love
of a
Devil*

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Chapter One

Six o'clock. Geoff looked at the clock again. It was already an hour later than when he said he would be home. Maybe the clock was wrong. It was always a little off, but never a whole hour. Students messed with it every day, but they wouldn't set it that far ahead. He would have noticed it by this time. He was late and Heather wouldn't like it, or maybe she would. He wasn't sure which was worse, having her angry with him for being late or having her not notice that he wasn't there. He was going to get one or the other. There was no escaping that.

"She really is a smart kid." The parent in front of Geoff droned on. How many more times could she tell him that her daughter deserved better than the F she had earned on the last test? An hour was plenty of time for that and the woman kept talking.

Geoff wanted to give the student a better grade, but it wouldn't be fair to her or the other students. He couldn't just tell the woman that her daughter was lazy. He might have if the woman had given him a chance to string more than two words together, but she kept going on and on.

Geoff looked at his watch. The clock was wrong. It was a quarter after six instead. Even if he stood up immediately and ran out to the car, it would be six-thirty or later before he made it through the door at home. What would Heather think?

"Could you let her take the test over, or give her bonus points or something?" the woman asked.

"There's still time to make up for it. One bad grade isn't the end of the world. She'll have to work hard, but she can still graduate."

"Oh, she'll work!" the woman said. "Don't worry about that. I always sit on her and make her work. That's why I don't understand why she got such a low grade."

If the F was a result of this woman forcing her daughter to study, Geoff could only imagine how bad it would have been if the girl had been left alone. It couldn't get much worse. Trying to talk to this woman was going nowhere, but she wouldn't shut up long enough for him to tell her that he had other things he needed to do.

"I need to get home." The woman ended the conversation, stood and gathered her things.

The end of the conversation came so abruptly that Geoff wasn't sure he heard her correctly, but the moment he saw her back, Geoff jumped from his seat, dumped one more stack of papers in his brief case, closed the lid and secured the latches. He started to take off his sweater and leave it on the back of his chair. Heather hated seeing it. She said it was an ugly brown and she thought even less of the leather patches on the elbows. Geoff often left it at school, but taking it off would take just that much more time. He grabbed his briefcase, locked the door of his classroom and ran down the hall toward the parking lot.

On the way home, every traffic light was red and all of the slow drivers were out in force. Why did everything have to take longer when he was in a hurry? Then again, why was he in such a rush to get home? Wasn't he just asking for Heather to reach into his chest and yank at his heart with her icy grip? In the time they had been married, she had learned to do that very well and his late return would be just the excuse she needed.

"You're late," he imagined Heather would say when he walked through the door. "I was worried about you."

To that, he would try to assure her that she had no need to be concerned and it was only a parent who kept him at school for so long.

He pulled into the garage, closed the door, gathered his things and went inside.

"Are you home already?" Heather did no more than glance at him.

"It's almost seven. I thought you might be a little worried."

"Why should I? I knew you'd show up eventually. You always do. It isn't like we really need you at home for anything." She never looked up from the television. The sitcom she watched had recorded its last episode several years earlier. Geoff had seen it five or six times and couldn't imagine why Heather was so engrossed in it.

"If you want supper, you'll have to fix it yourself," Heather said. "We ate without you."

"Of course you did," Geoff said under his breath. He couldn't expect them to do otherwise, but couldn't she have called to ask where he was or something? She used to do that, but with the way things had turned out, maybe he

was just going to have to put up with it. Could he do that for another fifty years? He wasn't sure.

Jesse and Laurel were playing in the floor. Neither was very happy. Laurel was trying to play with her brother's toy truck and Jesse was trying to take it away from her. But when they saw their Daddy, they quit what they were doing and ran to hug him.

The baby, Logan, sat with Heather on the couch. He seemed much more interested in his mother's shiny necklace than he did in Geoff's arrival. Geoff went to kiss both mother and child.

Heather stood up and thrust Logan on Geoff. "You change his diaper."

Geoff could smell the strong odor. Logan had filled it well. He put his briefcase on the floor, so he could hold Logan more easily.

"Don't put your briefcase there," Heather said.

Geoff left it where it was. If Heather didn't like it, she could move it or wait until he finished with Logan.

"Do I have to do everything?" Heather grabbed the briefcase by the handle and dropped it in its home next to the desk.

Geoff changed Logan while Heather changed clothes to go running. He was still trying to get Logan cleaned up when Heather came out of the master bedroom.

"I'll be back after while," she said and kissed him. It was out of habit, but Geoff would take what he could get.

"Did you wash clothes today," he asked.

"I didn't wash yours, if that's what you're asking. It's hard keeping up with three kids all day."

"I know it is." He didn't want her to think he was criticizing her, but was it all that much trouble to throw some-

thing in the washer? "I just wanted to know if I need to wash something to wear tomorrow."

"You would think that all I am is a cook and a wash woman," she said. "I'm sure you've got something you can wear. I'll finish the washing tomorrow. No one is going to notice what you wear anyway, with that silly cardigan you insist on wearing."

"It's cold in my room," he said. "They've got the air conditioner cranked up right now."

"Maybe I should find something else for you to wear. Have I ever told you how awful that thing looks on you?"

"I thought you said you were going running," Geoff said.

"What? You don't want me criticizing your precious security blanket? You're as bad as Linus." Heather looked out the window. "It's almost too late to go running. You should have gotten home sooner."

Now she wanted to show concern about him coming home late. She was just toying with him. Then again, maybe she had really wanted to go running. He could never tell.

Geoff would have preferred that Heather go running than to fuss about his sweater. What could he do? Tell her that it wasn't a security blanket? He couldn't deny that he felt a little easier about teaching when he wore it. For ten years it had been his, but the thick brown sweater still reminded him of his favorite English teacher, Mr. Andrews.

On the day of his high school graduation, Geoff had been talking to some of his family when Mr. Andrews came up to him.

"Still planning on being an English teacher?" Mr. Andrews asked.

"That's the plan," Geoff said.

"Good," Mr. Andrews looked off into the distance, as if he remembered something from long ago. "I'm retiring this year and it's good to know that there will be people to carry on."

Geoff heard the sadness in his teacher's voice, but he didn't know what to say. "I hope to do that."

"I want to give you something that will help." Mr. Andrews unbuttoned the brown cardigan that Geoff had seen him wear so often in class. He handed it to Geoff. "Every good English teacher needs a thick cardigan. Take good care of it."

Heather and his students loved to make fun of his cardigan, but it gave Geoff confidence every time he put it on. It made him feel like he could do no wrong when he taught. He just wished its magical powers could do something about the relief he felt as he watched Heather leave to go running. He wasn't supposed to feel glad when his wife wasn't home.

"Did you do anything fun today?" Geoff turned his attention to his oldest son.

"Momma made me stay in my room."

"That doesn't sound like fun," Geoff said. "Why did you have to stay in your room?"

"Momma's friend was here." Jesse said.

Man or woman? Geoff decided he really didn't want to know. It wouldn't change anything, either way, and what would she do if he went to her and insinuated that she had invited a man into the house for the wrong reason. Right before their anniversary was not the time he wanted to bring that up again. They had had a good year. It wasn't as

bad as it could have been. He didn't know why he had to doubt Heather's faithfulness.

Things had gotten better after Heather stood in front of the church and apologized. She didn't give details about what she had done, but she didn't have to. The whole church had heard about her and the former outreach minister. Some people knew the outreach minister's wife had gone home and found Heather in bed with him. Others had guessed what they had been doing, even if they didn't know how they had been discovered. It was hard on the church. The outreach minister had quickly resigned. His wife left him and he moved out of town. The church excluded Heather. As difficult as it was for everyone else it was more difficult for Geoff. He wasn't sure what hurt him more, what she had done or the fear that their marriage was over. His mother's words made it even worse, cutting him like a knife to the heart. "I warned you not to marry her."

After Heather apologized, things smoothed out. At times, Geoff could imagine that she still loved him. Maybe she did, but that didn't keep her from taking pleasure in goading him. The church took her back, though most of her old friends stopped spending time with her. Whether that was by their choice or hers, Geoff feared that not having friends around would be hard on Heather. Maybe the day's visitor would make a good friend for Heather. Maybe he was just trying too hard to protect himself from being hurt again.

Geoff pulled a stack of papers out of his briefcase and put them on the dining room table. He pulled out his favorite red pen and began grading papers. He held Logan on his lap while he worked. Jesse decided that he wanted

to help his Daddy grade papers and showed up at the table with some paper and crayons. With his red crayon, he drew circles around invisible words, and drew smiley faces or frowns at the top of the page. When he grew tired of that, he began to draw pictures.

When Heather returned from running, she stuck her armpit near Geoff's nose.

"Why do you have to do that?" Geoff asked, pulling away from it.

"I just wanted to make sure that you know I really went running."

"Why would I think otherwise?" he asked.

"No reason," she said. "I'm going to take a shower."

It crossed Geoff's mind that Heather might have been feeling guilty about something. He second guessed himself and wondered if he was reading more into it than he should because he feared the worst.

Heather came back out a few minutes later. She was dressed to go somewhere.

"Where are you going?" Geoff asked.

"Tonight's my Bible study night. Did you forget?"

"You're running late aren't you?"

She glanced at the clock. "I guess I am. Whose fault is that?" Then she was gone.

He knew it was good that she had her Bible study, but it seemed like she was slipping away. It was one more thing to keep them apart, making it impossible to rebuild what they had once had. He saw history repeating itself and this time he wasn't sure he could survive. At least it was Bible study and not another man.

Chapter Two

The blue Corvette made a sharp turn at the drive leading into the apartment complex. It wasn't far, just up ahead on the right, but Xander floored the accelerator to keep from losing his quarry. He saw the grandmotherly woman as soon as the peddle hit the floor. She chose to back out into traffic at the very moment that Xander needed to race down the road, if he hoped to pass through the gate before it closed. She backed far enough out into the street that all four lanes came to a stop. Xander honked his horn. The woman held a single finger up in the air, then she put the car in drive and proceeded slowly down the street.

As soon as the old woman crept past the apartment driveway, Xander floored the accelerator again. He swung his car into the entrance and saw that the gate was already sliding shut. Thinking that his goal was more important than his car, Xander nosed his car into the opening. The sensor detected his car soon enough that he didn't think it would leave a dent, but it did leave a scratch. He had no time to worry about that. The gate slid back open and Xan-

der sped into the parking lot. He pulled into one of the empty parking spaces as the Corvette pulled into one a little farther down. He hurriedly rolled down the window and pointed one of his many toys, a directional microphone, at the Corvette. He stuck the headphones on his head and grabbed his camera just before the doors on the Corvette opened. The lights in the parking lot only provided dim lighting. Xander hoped it would be enough for his camera.

The woman stuck one long thin leg after another out of the driver's side before she stood to her feet. Xander had already seen her wavy light brown or blond hair as he had followed the car through town, but when she stood up and he could see her figure in the dim light, he liked what he saw.

"Okay, Stanley, what's a babe like that doing with a guy like you?" Xander used the camera to zoom in on her left hand. Whether there was enough light for pictures or not, the camera was not wasted. "Ah, you're married. I wonder if your husband knows what you're up to. I bet you don't want him to find out."

Xander's business was all about information. Some clients paid him to provide information. Some paid him to keep information quiet. Business was good. There were plenty of wives who wanted to know what their husbands were really doing when they worked late. There were also plenty of husbands who wanted to know what their wives did on "girls' night out." A very ethical man, Xander always gave his clients what they wanted, but the other man or other woman was almost always willing to pay for his silence.

Stanley, the client's husband, walked around the car and joined the woman on the left side. He wrapped his arm around her middle and then kissed her. The two were about the same height. With her three inch heels and long thin legs sticking out from her skirt, she looked like she had a slight advantage over Stanley, who was short for a man.

"Here's the key." The woman held the key out for Stanley to take.

"Keep it. I want my girl to have a nice ride."

"You're giving it to me?"

"If you don't want it, I can get you something else."

"No, I love it!" The woman showed her appreciation by giving Stanley another kiss.

"Way to go, Stanley," Xander whispered. "Give the woman a \$60,000 car."

"I thought about getting *Heather's Vette* painted across the back, but I wasn't sure if you would like it."

"It's a whole lot better than anything Geoff ever gave me."

"Some guys just don't know how to treat a woman."

Xander wrote the names Heather and Geoff in his notebook. He would need those names. It was a good start, but he would need to build on that information.

"I thought we agreed not to talk about our spouses tonight," Stanley said.

"I'm sorry, it just came out. It won't happen again. It's just you and me. No one else exists."

Heather and Stanley walked along one of the paths and disappeared in the darkness between the buildings. Xander rolled up the window and grabbed only the bare essentials from his favorite toys. It was more important

that he know which apartment they were in than that he have all of his equipment. He could always go back if he needed something else.

Before he could open the door, there was a tap on the glass. Xander looked up to see someone standing there. He looked like he might be one of the college students who lived in the apartment complex.

"Hey, man! You can't park here."

"I won't be here long," Xander yelled through the glass.

"What? I can't hear you."

"I won't be here long."

"This is my parking space. You can't park here."

The kid was thickheaded and refused to understand. It was already taking more time than Xander had hoped. Any delay at all was going to hurt him. He had hoped to grab his video camera, then run across the parking lot to get near enough Stanley and Heather that he would be able tape them walking together and then going into one of the apartments. He needed the shots of what they would be doing inside too, for the benefit of his client. That would be harder to get, but the first thing he had to do was figure out which apartment they were in. The yahoo standing beside his car was preventing that.

"I need to park here for just a few minutes and then I'll let you have your space." Xander opened the door so the kid would hear him.

"The guest parking is down there." The kid pointed to some empty parking spaces five buildings away.

"I've got something I need to do and then I'll let you have your space."

"One hundred bucks."

"What?"

"I'll let you use it for a hundred bucks."

"Okay, fine," Xander said.

"Right now."

"I don't carry that much cash." That was a lie, but he had not intention of giving this kid any of his hard earned money.

"Either you pay up or I'm going to pull your car out with my truck."

Xander glanced over at the vehicle the kid was driving. It was jacked up to make space for the big knobby tires. Even with it sitting there idling, the engine sounded like it could produce a lot of power. He could feel the vibration. His own little car was no match for that beast. It had already taken too long for it to be worth the trouble, so Xander gave up, backed out of the space and let the kid have it. He drove his own little car down to the guest parking.

He started to take only his digital camcorder and his directional microphone, but then decided to grab another device out of the back seat. You never knew when someone might decide to use a cell phone. Some people talked on them in some of the most unusual situations. If either Stanley or Heather was on the phone, Xander wanted to know who was on the other end. Before he could do that, he would have to find the apartment and that wouldn't be easy. Xander grabbed another toy. It didn't look like much, but it was his pride and joy. It could measure the vibration of a piece of glass and turn it into sound. Like much of his equipment, he had built it at home. This particular device was smaller than any similar devices he had found online and it produced a higher quality sound than any he had tried.

By the time Xander made it back to where Heather had parked the Corvette, another car was in the parking lot. The new addition was a long black limousine. The driver leaned against it, smoking a cigarette. Xander recognized the driver right away and he knew that the driver would recognize him, if he saw him. Xander ducked behind some cars to get past him. It was possible that the limousine was there for someone else, but it was probably there to pick up Stanley. He would need a ride home, after giving Heather a car, and it only made sense that he would have someone from his father's limousine service pick him up, but with the limousine already there, that also meant that Stanley wasn't planning on staying very long. Xander didn't have much time.

Based on where they had parked and the path they had taken, there were four, maybe five buildings they might have gone into. There were six units on each floor and there were three floors. Xander did the math in his head and he didn't like the figure he came up with. There were seventy-two, maybe even ninety possible units that he would need to check if he hoped to find the adulterous couple.

He started with the units that he thought were the most likely to fit Stanley's tastes. It would be one of the top units because Stanley wouldn't want any prying eyes seeing what he was doing. The units with potted plants or bicycles were out too. Standing on the ground near the middle of the five buildings, Xander began to shine the laser of his prized tool on the glass windows of the suspect units. The dim light from the nighttime lighting made it easier to see the laser, but he knew that there was a risk of the occupants seeing the laser shining on the shades or

ceiling as it passed through the glass. It would be even easier to see in a darkened room and there was a good possibility that Stanley and Heather would be in a darkened room.

The first two units Xander checked were quiet. He was able to pick the sound of a refrigerator off of one window. On the other unit he was able to get the sound of a grandfather clock, but other than that, it was quiet. On the third unit he heard some noises that sounded promising. He listened for a while and decided that it was just a dog chewing on a toy. In one unit, a couple was fighting. They were throwing things at each other and yelling in Spanish. He moved on to the next unit. He eliminated three more units before he found what he was looking for.

"How did your wife take it when you told her that you were moving out?" Heather asked.

"We aren't talking about spouses, remember?"

"That was a silly rule. It's too hard to keep."

"You're the one who made it."

"So, I'll break it. What did your wife say?"

"I haven't told her yet."

"We agreed."

"I know, but some things came up. I'll do it."

"When?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon, but let's not worry about that. We have all night to ourselves and tomorrow you can go play with that new Corvette while I'm away."

"Yeah, right," Xander said to himself. "I wonder what Heather would think if she knew you have a car waiting for you."

"Does your wife know you went out and bought a Corvette?"

"She won't suspect anything. We've got money in so many places that she won't notice. Once we get the title transferred to you, it'll be too late for her to do anything."

A cell phone started ringing, somewhere in the apartment.

"I thought you turned that off," Heather said.

"I must have forgotten. I had better get it. It might be important."

Xander turned on his little tool. He wasn't sure it would work, with him being so far from the cell phone, but it was worth a shot.

"Hello?" Stanley said.

"You said you wanted me to call you now." The voice probably belonged to the driver out in the parking lot, but Xander wasn't sure.

"I'll have to go down there to take a look at it," Stanley said.

"Do you really have to go?" Heather asked.

"Yes, something has come up. I'll try to come back tonight if it doesn't take too long."

"Do you want me to drive you?"

"No, I'll call a taxi," he said. Stanley began talking as if he was talking to someone who could send a taxi. This call didn't even register on Xander's device. Stanley was talking to a phone that wasn't connected. Xander wanted to dial Stanley's cell phone, but Stanley ended his conversation with the fake dispatcher before Xander could put the call through.

Stanley came out of the apartment, walked down the stairs, and out to the limo. Xander didn't bother trying to follow it. He knew it would take Stanley home to his wife.

A few minutes later, Xander saw Heather come out of the apartment and walk toward the parking lot. Xander ran to his car, wanting to follow the Corvette, but Heather didn't get into the Corvette. She stood at the gate for a few minutes. A taxi arrived and she got in.

Xander followed the taxi through town. It pulled into a church parking lot. Heather paid the driver, got out and climbed into another vehicle. Xander figured that made sense. Even with a Corvette, she wouldn't just leave another car parked in a church parking lot. He made the mistake of thinking that she would take it back to the apartment with her. He headed in the direction of home, but in his rearview mirror, he saw her turn in the wrong direction. He would have to turn the car around quickly if he expected to keep up with her.

Chapter Three

He saw only handwriting so sloppy it gave him a headache as Geoff graded the last three papers. He had three more and he would be done for the night. The phone rang. It was probably someone who wanted him to respond to a survey. Why did people like that have to call? The answering machine could get it. Then again, maybe it was Heather. She could be sitting on the side of the road with a broken down car. Geoff knew that was unlikely, but the thought scared him. He pushed his chair back from the table, sloshing coffee on the papers he was grading and rushed to answer the phone.

"Is Heather there?" Tiffany, the associate pastor's wife asked when he answered the phone.

"No, I guess she's still at Bible study." Geoff knew Tiffany would have been at Bible study too.

"That's why I called," Tiffany said. "She didn't show up. I wanted to see if she was okay."

He tried to think of where she might have gone. Maybe she really was sitting on the side of the road.

"I don't know where she is." Geoff leaned against the wall for support. "She was running late, but she said she was going."

"She didn't leave late because she wasn't feeling well did she?"

"No, I'm the one who made her late, but there wasn't any reason for her to not go."

"Maybe she had some errands to run and decided to do that instead."

"She would have told me." Geoff wished that were true. Sometimes Heather told him where she was going. Sometimes she didn't.

"Maybe you should try calling her cell phone."

"I'll try that, but she won't answer if she's mad at me." Geoff wasn't sure what Heather had been thinking when she left. She was hard to read at times.

"Do you want me to call her? I don't have her cell phone number."

"No, I'll do it." The last thing Geoff wanted was for Tiffany to call his wife for him.

"I will, if you think it will help."

The sound of the garage door kept him from responding.

"She just got home."

"Can I make a suggestion?" Tiffany asked.

"Sure." Geoff wasn't about to tell her he didn't want her advice.

"Don't ask her where she's been. She needs to know you trust her."

Why did Tiffany have to tell him that? Geoff wondered if she knew their marriage still wasn't perfect.

Heather came through the door, with her Bible in hand as Geoff put down the phone.

"How was Bible study?" Geoff sat down on the couch and waited for an answer.

Heather put her purse on the floor next to the couch. She picked up a piece of paper on the floor, looked at it for a moment and dropped it back where it had been.

"It was okay."

"The kids are asleep."

"Good." Heather sat on the couch next to him and leaned against him.

Geoff wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She rested her head against his chest. They sat like that for several minutes. Geoff could feel her hair rubbing against his chin as he breathed in and out. All that mattered was that the Heather was in his arms. He longed to stop time and live in that moment.

"I can hear your heart." Heather moved her head, ever so slightly, to a different position.

"What is it telling you?"

"Nothing. You're alive, I guess," she said. "Did you remember what tomorrow is?"

"Of course."

"I almost forgot. I had to run to the store. Were you worried?"

"I wasn't until Tiffany called. I'm glad you're home."

"Then you knew I didn't go to Bible study."

Geoff feared Heather would be angry with him for implying he hadn't known.

She turned to look at his face. She looked like she was trying to decide what to say. She sighed and leaned back

against him. "I need to call Tiffany and tell her why I wasn't there."

Geoff was glad when she didn't make a move to do so.

"You don't have to worry. I'll always come home." She shifted her weight, but she didn't leave his arms.

Chapter Four

After making a quick, illegal u-turn and running a red light, Xander caught up with Heather's car. He saw no reason to stay back. She wouldn't think he was following her. Even if she did, she had to go home sometime.

She made a couple of turns before she pulled into a driveway. The garage door was already on the way up by the time her front wheels hit the drive. Xander knew he had one more piece of information. He knew where she lived. From that he could learn the rest of what he needed to know. He stopped in front of the house, rolled down the window and pointed one of his toys at the front door. It would let him hear what went on inside.

"How was Bible study?" a man's voice asked. The man had to be Geoff. He was probably as clueless as other men about what their wives were doing.

"It was okay," Heather said.

Xander wasn't big on going to church, but he thought he might like Heather's brand of Bible study. Maybe that woman a few houses down would like to do some Bible study with him. That reminded him; he needed to get his