

"Better the Devil"

won **Honorable Mention** in the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Nineteenth Collection*, 2006;
and **Honorable Mention** in the L. Ron Hubbard Writer's of the Future Contest, 2004.

It appears in [*Circles in the Hair*](#)

© 2005 Faith L. Justice

Mrs. Marston heard the warning honk as her daughter's rusty Nova puffed onto the cracked concrete driveway. 7:28. Not bad for her workaholic daughter, but then tonight Abby had a good reason for an early arrival.

"Ten points for punctuality," Mrs. Marston muttered. According to her mother's point system, most of Abby's infrequent love interests barely made it into the "acceptable human" range, much less scored as a suitable son-in-law.

Mrs. Marston sniffed at the aroma wafting from the aluminum pot on her ancient Chambers stove. Corned beef and cabbage made the traditional way - with corned beef from the can. The mangled container with the key broke halfway (Mrs. Marston always kept a screwdriver in the utensil drawer for just such emergencies) nestled in the recycle bin.

She bustled to one of the antique mirrors in the foyer, patted her silver hair into neat waves and freshened her 'Perfectly Coral' lipstick.

Abby rushed through the door, hugged her mother and turned around with a laugh and a wave. "Come on in, Michael. She doesn't bite...often."

The tall shadow on the porch resolved itself into the image of a Brooks Brothers accountant, fortyish, a bit thin on top and a little thick around the middle. A wave of dizziness swept over Mrs. Marston. She always had strong reactions to her daughter's dates, but this didn't feel right at all. She hadn't even reacted this way to the lawyer.

She wiped a damp palm on her dress then held it out. "Welcome, Michael. I've heard so much about you, I'm glad we finally get to meet."

"Oh, Mother," Abby brushed a blond curl out of her face, "you act like I've been hiding Michael away. We only met last month!"

"But you've been corresponding for a year or more."

Michael shook her hand then put his arm around Abby's shoulder. "Mrs. Marston, I'm equally glad to meet you." His eyes twinkled with good humor and softened to a warm glow when he looked at Abby. She hugged him, looking up with her angel's face.

Twenty-five points for genuine affection.

Mrs. Marston's heart lurched. It had been twenty-two long years since her husband died and left her with thirteen-year-old Abby to raise. She missed him every day. She wanted the same kind of love for her daughter, but something was naggingly wrong with Michael.

"Come on, you two. No need to stand here in the hall. Come sit in the living room a spell and have a glass of wine."

Michael and Abby settled on the couch draped in a Granny-square afghan. Mrs. Marston took her place on her mother's oak rocker.

"White or red?" She gestured toward the decanters of wine.

"Red, please," Michael replied.

She poured the Lambrusco into the Depression-era glasses and gave Michael an appraising glance. A red and black halo seemed to blur the edge of his features whenever she looked at him from the corner of her eyes. It disappeared with a direct gaze. She fought down a sudden wave of nausea and zeroed in on her target.

"Beherit." She sipped the red wine to settle her stomach. "That's an interesting last name, Michael." The grin on his face tightened. "The data bases I checked say it's an ancient Syrian name for the devil. Has that caused you any problems here in the Bible Belt?"

"Data bases?" Michael's eyebrows arched upward. "Please forgive me if this sounds rude, but people of your, uh, generation don't generally seem to take to computers. My boss is techno-illiterate."

Minus twenty-five points.

"I warned you that Mom is a research librarian." Abby squeezed Michael's knee. "She's been looking up exotica for mossy old professors for as long as I can remember. She's the one who got me hooked on computers."

"Then I have even more to be grateful to you for," Michael beamed at Mrs. Marston. "You made it possible for us to meet."

"What do you do, Michael?"

"I'm an agent."

Mrs. Marston's stomach tightened. "Sports? Literary? Talent?"

"I'm a typical middleman. I find people who have needs, dreams, wishes and put them in touch with people who can help them - for a fee. Actually, I'm looking to get out of the business."

"Why? Wish fulfillment seems like nice work."

"Mom, it's too early to give Michael the third degree." Abby laughed and pulled her mother out of the rocker. "Come on, let's have dinner. I smell corned beef and cabbage and I'm starved."

Minus 20 for dodging.

Seated at the fragile drop-leaf table, Michael looked around at the family portraits on the wall. "Is that you, Mrs. Marston?" He pointed to a picture of two people beaming in front of a vine-draped porch.

"Yes, and my husband David." She looked longingly at the picture. They had both been so young. She never felt the full weight of her seventy-two years as much as when she looked at that picture. Where had all the years gone?

Mrs. Marston returned to the here and now to catch the tail end of another question. "What? No. We were both only children. David taught history here at the university and I worked in the library. We thought the families would end with us. Then just as we gave up hope, Abby came along to plague our middle age." She patted her daughter's hand. "And a blessing she's been to me since the day she was born. I only wish David could've seen what a fine young woman she's grown into."

Mrs. Marston gave Michael a sharp glance. "She's dearer to me than my own soul and I wouldn't take kindly to anyone trifling with her affections."

"Mother!"

"I thought you said she didn't bite?" Michael asked with a nervous laugh.

"Normally she doesn't." Abby raised an eyebrow at her mother.

"Just a friendly warning. I'm sure I have no reason to worry. Eat up, dears, for dessert we have lime Jell-O salad with carrots and marshmallows."

Michael turned a little green inside his aura but dug into his steaming dinner.

Ten points for eating.

"So what's the score?" Abby asked as soon as she returned from dropping Michael at his apartment.

"He zeroed out."

"What? Mom, you can't be serious. I thought you two would get along wonderfully. Doesn't he remind you of Pop?"

Mrs. Marston gaped at her daughter. "Your father? How much do you really know about this man, Abby?"

"Enough. We've been exchanging e-mails for over a year. You get to know a person pretty well over that time. He's a wonderful man. Well-read, witty and a terrific cook. You two have a lot in common. He's a history buff."

"I bet he's seen a lot of history," Mrs. Marston muttered.

"What?"

"I just don't feel good about Michael. Call it 'Mother's intuition.'"

Abby's face brightened. "Is that all?" She kissed her mother on the cheek, "That's not good enough, Mom. I know you haven't approved of most of my men friends. But I wasn't really serious about any of them. This is different. I love Michael. We'll all make it work somehow. You'll see."

"But, Sweetheart..."

"Michael and I are going to be married..."

"Married! You just barely met the man. He could be an axe murderer or...uh...an insurance salesman for all you know. For heaven's sake, girl, think this through."

"I know this seems sudden, but we love each other and don't want to wait." Abby's smile faded. "Mom, you and Pop had something special. Even as a kid, I knew. You loved each other so much and included me in that love. I want what you two had - someone to care for and to care for me in that special way." The grin returned. "Besides, don't you want grandchildren?"

"I don't care if I have grandchildren or not. I just want you to be happy and you don't need a man for that. You have a good job, friends, me."

"I know, but *this* man *does* make me happy, Mom." Abby hugged her mother and whispered, "Try to make an effort. For my sake. I don't know how I'd cope if the two people I love most in the world didn't get along." She released her mother, smiled and floated to her bedroom whistling, "I Could Have Danced All Night."

That night, Mrs. Marston dreamed about holding twin grandsons who suddenly sprouted tails and horns.

The next morning, she accessed her networks. Her fingers tapped furiously, cross-referencing "Beherit," "demon" and "banishment."

"Gotcha," she whispered as the files printed. She made a list of the supplies she would need.

She smiled as she pinned on her hat. "We'll see what kind of answers you have this time, Mr. Beherit."

When she got home, there was a message on the machine. Michael wanted to drop by that evening and talk to her. Mrs. Marston called back and made the date for six. Perfect. Abby almost always worked late on Thursdays.

Promptly at six, Michael knocked on the door. Mrs. Marston opened it to see him standing with flowers and a warm smile. "I'm so glad you could see me, Mrs. Marston. I had the feeling we didn't connect last night. I'd like the chance to make up for it."

Ten points for sensitivity.

"Well, your instincts are good. I was going to call you, but you beat me to it. Here, let me put these in water." She took the bouquet of roses and baby's breath and carefully set them on the mantel. A vase of flowering dogwood graced the mahogany coffee table.

She seated Michael on the sofa and took her accustomed spot on the rocker. She leaned forward and indicated a decanter of red wine. "You liked the red, if I remember right."

He nodded. Mrs. Marston carefully poured a small amount of the ruby liquid into a cut crystal glass and handed it to Michael. He took a sip as she asked, "So you want to marry my daughter?" He started coughing.

Mrs. Marston reached over to thump him on the back when he wheezed, "Sorry about that."

"Don't you like the wine?"

"'Yes' to your first question - I'd like to marry your daughter. 'No' to your second - it's a little sweet for my taste." He set the glass aside, wiping sweat from his pale forehead.

"I'm sorry, Michael."

"About the marriage or the wine?"

"Both. Abby and I are very close, you know. We took care of each other after her father died. I went back to work at the University Library. She worked her way through college. She's lived with me all her life."

"I love Abby, Mrs. Marston. I wouldn't hurt her. She's the most precious thing in the world to me. I..."

"Then you won't mind a little test?" Mrs. Marston interrupted.

"A test? What kind of test?" Michael looked wary.

Mrs. Marston took a rosewood box from the table, opened the lid and tossed the white crumbly contents on Michael. The places where the communion wafers landed smoked and burned with a sulfurous stench. He screamed as his form flickered and flared then resumed a human semblance. He panted and moaned as he tried to pat out the smoldering patches.

Mrs. Marston hesitated. She had only half believed her intuition. But the evidence had wavered before her eyes - a two-foot, red-scaled devil complete with cloven hoofs and forked tail had manifested for a brief moment. The rotten egg stench of sulfur still drenched the air.

With renewed vigor, she grabbed a couple of the flowering dogwood branches and approached Michael, mumbling a banishment prayer. He scrambled over the couch and tried to keep the massive piece of furniture between them.

"Mrs. Marston, please listen to me! Stop! You don't know what you're doing!" His voice rose to a piercing howl as Mrs. Marston switched him with the dogwood. His human form started to fade, revealing the red-scaled demon.

"Mom, I heard screaming..." Abby rushed in from the hallway and saw the cowering devil. She turned to her mother. "What the hell are you doing?" The diminutive demon ducked behind Abby's skirts.

"Hell is just where I'm sending this runty aberration. Stand out of my way, Abby; I've almost completed the banishment."

Abby blocked her mother's swing. "No, Mother, I won't let you hurt him. I know it's Michael and I...I love him!"

"Abby, I tried to explain to your mother, but..."

"He's a demon, Abby. Look at him!" Mrs. Marston reached around her daughter to take another swipe.

Abby grabbed the branches. "I've known he was a demon for weeks. Michael told me when we first met. I thought it was a joke until he did his changing act for me. He could have lied or tried to trick me. He didn't. We were friends long before we were lovers."

Michael peeked from behind Abby. "I want to retire, Mrs. Marston, settle down with Abby and maybe raise a family."

"You can't be serious!"

"He's the sweetest man I've known since Pop died."

Mrs. Marston slumped into the rocker and rubbed her face with one hand. She looked at her beautiful daughter and the creature she claimed to love. What had she done wrong? The last time it was an actor and now this!

She finally turned to address the warty apparition. "How can you 'retire'?' Aren't you under permanent contract?"

"I've been a faithful worker, primarily covering the priest, preacher and politician beat. It's very lucrative. I've exceeded my quota every year. Last year the evangelicals really put me over the top and I earned a satantical."

"A 'satantical'? I thought there was no rest for the wicked?" Mrs. Marston's lips quirked into an almost-smile.

"I'm not wicked. In a dimension of trials and tests, I fulfill a needed function. Without temptation, there could be no spiritual growth. But I'm willing to give up my career and try something new for Abby's sake."

"What's the price? There's always a catch when you deal with the devil."

Michael took Abby's hand. She looked down at the demon, her eyes brimming with tears. They both took a seat across from Mrs. Marston, Michael's feet dangling off the edge of the sofa.

"I'm immortal but I have no soul. If I become human, I grow old and die. But because I have no soul, when I die, I cease to exist. Abby will have to go on to the next life without me." He looked at Abby with such tenderness that it melted Mrs. Marston's heart. Abby started to sob.

"Abby, are you sure this is what you want?" Abby nodded, wiping her eyes. Even when she cried, she was beautiful. Mrs. Marston just got red and blotchy. How did she ever get such a perfect child?

"Mrs. Marston, there's more." Michael eyed the dogwood in her hand. "Could you please return me to my human form? I don't like Abby to see me this way." The demon's eyes glittered.

Mrs. Marston put the dogwood down, turned counterclockwise and spoke the banishment prayer backwards. Michael resumed his human semblance with only a few holes in his suit from the communion wafers.

"Okay, what's the 'more'?" Mrs. Marston sat down again.

Michael fidgeted. "Well, uh, it's about your husband."

"What about David?"

"He made a bargain with one of my colleagues on the tenured professor beat. I looked up the files after I met Abby."

"What?" Abby whispered and Mrs. Marston shouted. Abby dropped his hand.

"What bargain did David make?"

"To have Abby."

Mrs. Marston sat in stunned silence, staring at her daughter.

"Your husband loved you very much, and he knew how much you wanted a child. He wanted one almost as badly. But he basically wanted you to be happy. After meeting Abby, I completely understand why he would do that."

She had said Abby was dearer to her than her own soul, and meant it. Could she fault David for his love? Or Michael for his? Mrs. Marston began to cry. Abby offered an already soggy handkerchief.

"Momma, what are we going to do? Pop gave up his soul so I could be born. Michael is willing to become human and then be extinguished when he dies. Is it too much? Should I refuse?"

Mrs. Marston hugged her daughter. "No dear, Michael obviously loves you and you love him. I couldn't ask for more. But we can't have the father of my future grandchildren without a soul."

"And Pop. I can't stand the thought that he sacrificed his eternal happiness for me," Abby sobbed.

Mrs. Marston chewed a thumbnail while she thought. After a few moments she snapped her fingers. "I don't know what we can do, but I know where we can get some ideas. Let's talk about it over dinner. I've got a good tuna noodle dish planned."

Michael grimaced at Abby over his future mother-in-law's head. "Why don't you let me cook? I'd love to show you what I can do in the kitchen."

"Thank you, Michael." She looked up at him then chuckled. "Then I'll show you what someone of 'my generation' can do with a computer."

Michael turned a nice human red.

Ten points for blushing.

"This is good," Mrs. Marston mumbled, looking over the printouts spread across the linoleum kitchen table while nibbling a tuna crepe.

"The crepe or the data?" Michael asked.

"The crepe. The data are awful. The riddle thing has been done to death. There are over 1800 folk tales and songs from all over the world with riddle answers. Fiddling or singing won't work. I can't carry a tune in a bucket. Hmmm. No. Daniel Webster did that one. Human sacrifice...no. We're left with a bargain and we don't have much to trade except a soul. I'd rather spend eternity with David, anyway."

"No, Mom, I'll do it." Abby's jaw set is a stubborn line.

Michael took Abby's hand. "I won't allow it. I don't have a soul to give up and I'd rather stay that way than have either of you give up yours."

Fifty points for selflessness.

"That won't be necessary, Michael. The light bulb just came on. We've been thinking about past solutions, old traps. We've got to think about today. Something new. Something creative. And I think I've got it. Let's invite your boss over for a little chat. You get to make the hors d'oeuvres." Mrs. Marston licked her fingers. "I haven't tasted anything so good since David passed on."

The next afternoon, a sleek gray BMW pulled up in front of the Marston place. Mrs. Marston peeked from behind white lace curtains as Michael escorted a stunning redhead in black spike heels and a Gianni business suit up the sidewalk.

Mrs. Marston and Abby greeted them at the door. "Ladies, this is my boss, Lilith. This is Mrs. Marston and Abby, my intended, if we can work this out."

"I hope we can do business, Mrs. Marston. Abby." Lilith nodded.

Mrs. Marston motioned down the hallway, "If you will come this way, Lilith, we have some refreshments. Michael didn't mention that his supervisor was a...uh..."

"She-devil?" Lilith supplied. Her tinkling laugh sounded like ice breaking. "There are a few of us cracking through the glass ceiling into management."

She stopped at the entrance and looked around the living room, nostrils flaring. "Tsk, tsk, Mrs. Marston. I'm disappointed. Dogwood and consecrated wine? I suppose you have holy water on the windowsills and a lead-stoppered vase to hold me in. No one's tried that since sixteenth-century Italy. I came to do business, not ward off parlor tricks."

Mrs. Marston looked stunned.

She lifted her chin then pointed to a door further down the hall. "Well, Lilith, business is best conducted in an office. Will you join me in mine? You can obviously check it for traps, but I assure you there are none." Mrs. Marston showed the troop into a cluttered third bedroom converted to an office.

Lilith wrinkled her nose at the piles of printouts and stacks of research papers. Mrs. Marston cleared a couple of folding chairs and offered seats. She took the battered black desk chair and swiveled to face her guests.

"Michael told me you would be impossible to trap, but I didn't believe him." She sighed and her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Abby wants a soul for Michael and I want my husband's soul released from his torment, but we don't have anything to bargain with."

Lilith glanced at her Rolex. "Let's cut to the chase, people. A soul for a soul. You two sign away your souls after death and your loved ones get cared for today. Not a bad bargain. Do we have a deal?"

All three tried to talk at once, arguing with one another, pleading with Lilith, each trying to be more self-sacrificing than the next.

"Enough," Lilith's bored voice cut through the clamor. "A soul for a soul. It's not a package deal. If one of you wants to take it and the other doesn't, that's fine. If neither wants it, that's fine, too. But make up your minds."

The hall clock punctuated the silence with a sepulchral bong. Lilith picked up her Gucci briefcase.

"No, please don't leave, Lilith." Mrs. Marston looked around the room, her gaze shifted from piles of paper, to books to hardware. "I think I have an alternative for you."

Lilith raised a sculpted eyebrow. "I have a number of other appointments." She turned toward the door.

"I think this might work. You basically deal in chaos, right? A soul's eternal suffering is just a by-product of the process of sowing discord."

Lilith turned back to the huddled trio. "So?"

"My computer!"

"Your computer?" Lilith snorted delicately through her nose. "Sorry, I deal only in ephemeralware. A colleague of mine was in charge of the Y2K fiasco. He's been busted back to the saintly set."

"I'm offering worldwide chaos. I can create a program that will give you direct access to major nets around the world. You could be the worst virus the world has ever seen. Spreading from net to net to individual machines. You could be subtle in your damage, or devastating."

"Subtle is more my style." She looked at the machine and narrowed her eyes. "How would this work?"

"Let's see..." Mrs. Marston grabbed a book on viruses off her shelf, rifled the pages and stopped about one-third through. Her finger moved down the page. "Here. The best way would be for you to invest your essence into a file that I'll create. I can send it out as a simple virus attached to data packets. Once you are on the system, you break out and attach to any net you choose - transportation, banking, military. You can scramble data, switch file directories, misdirect email, or make a system crash."

"That sounds too simple."

"You can hop from net to net in nanoseconds causing what chaos you want. Just erasing files will send the world into a panic. You can exit by any output device anywhere in the world. But once you're out, you're out. You won't get back in with my help."

Lilith tapped a pointed shoe. The other three held their breaths. "Understood. You put me into the computer now and I'll give you the souls after."

"Souls first, then the program. After all, why should I trust the 'Princess of Lies'?"

"One soul now and one later," Lilith countered. "After all, I've never done this before. What if I can't do what you say?"

"You can do it. But you'll never find out unless you try. It's a small investment for the potential return. Both souls now, or no virus program."

"You drive a hard bargain, Mrs. Marston." Lilith waved her hand over the Gucci bag and it opened. She took out a standard parchment contract signed "David Marston" - in blood. She flicked her French manicured nails and it smoldered into flames. "David's soul is now free of its bondage. Michael, are you sure you want to remain in this form? You could look like Tom Cruise or Daniel Day-Lewis."

"No, thanks." Michael smiled with slightly crooked teeth. "I like this form. It's comfortable."

Abby cuddled closer and put her arm around his waist. "I don't want to fight off every woman in town. He's perfect the way he is."

Lilith shrugged. "Your choice."

She took out a plain gold ring. "Here's a new soul to do with as you wish, Michael."

He took the ring and inspected it. "How did you wrangle this, Lilith?"

"Networking, dear. Being to being, not electronic." She patted him on the cheek. "If this human business doesn't work out, you can give me a call. You always got your numbers and made me look good. I'm going to miss you."

He put the ring on his left ring finger. Mrs. Marston saw the red and black aura flicker into a cool blue-green halo, then disappear.

"Your turn, Mrs. Marston. Time to pay up."

Mrs. Marston licked her lips and turned on her computer. She inserted a blank disk and created a file named "chaos.exe." Lilith smiled over her shoulder.

"Just invest yourself where you see this symbol and I can send you out."

Lilith dissolved into a black roiling mist, compacted to a thread and disappeared into the disk drive. Within half a second she streaked of the drive out and reformed. Shaking with anger, she stalked toward Mrs. Marston.

"Why didn't you send me on? I waited eons in there!"

"Eons? You disappeared, then reappeared immediately."

"That's not possible. I thought I would die of boredom. It felt longer than I've existed."

Mrs. Marston scratched her head. "Obviously, we're still here and no older. We would be dust if your subjective experience were a true one. What could have happened?" She tapped a bitten fingernail on a front tooth while she thought.

"Maybe you were experiencing time relative to the atomic level. It just seemed like forever, in the same way we experience the life of a redwood tree as being immeasurably slow, yet the tree experiences our lives as mere flashes in time. It felt like eons to you, but it actually was less than a second." Mrs. Marston coughed as Lilith's smoldering produced sulfur fumes. "Could you tone it down a little, dearie? We can try again."

Mrs. Marston swiveled her chair to face the monitor. She turned her head and said over her shoulder. "You hop into the computer. It will take me several minutes to prepare the program after you're invested in the file. Then I have to connect with the net."

Lilith shuddered, "Several minutes! Half a second was too long. The devil save me from that fate. I can't hang around in that cloudy nothingness for a seeming eternity."

"That's too bad." Mrs. Marston swiveled back around and held out her hand to the she-devil. "Well, I filled my part of the bargain. Thanks for doing business with me."

Lilith's eyes narrowed in suspicion, and then a smile grew from the corners of her lips. She began to laugh and clapped Mrs. Marston's hand between her two. "Well done, Mrs. Marston, well done. No one has come up with an original dodge in centuries. Hmmm. I wonder if this can be used on..." Her eyes unfocused for a few seconds then refocused on Mrs. Marston. "Thanks for the technology lesson."

Lilith gathered her bag, kissed Michael on the cheek and headed for the door. "It has truly been a pleasure, Mrs. Marston. I'm rooting for you to make it to heaven. I don't think I could take the competition if you arrived in our organization."

"Wherever David ends up, you can count on me following."

"I'll make sure to expedite his exit, personally." Lilith swayed down the sidewalk and gracefully folded herself into the BMW. It pulled away with barely a whisper.

Michael picked his future mother-in-law up in a bear hug and swung her around. "You were magnificent. I didn't think anyone could out-smart Lilith."

"Michael, please put me down," she huffed.

Abby crowed, "I knew you could do it! You're a match for any devil."

Mrs. Marston, feet planted firmly on the floor, patted her hair in place and smoothed her dress. She picked up Abby's hand and looked into her shining eyes. "That's what mothers are for, Sweetheart."

Author's note: This one is a favorite of mine; it's a strange combination of an Italian folktale ("The Devil's Mother-in-law") and a new mother's anxiety over the fate of her child. My original version followed the folktale pretty closely and the young woman was an airhead, but I couldn't abide the idea of having a bimbo daughter even in fiction. Abby became the beautiful, capable daughter I hoped my baby would grow up to be and Mrs. Marston was a good approximation of my fiercely protective mom (with a dash of me thrown in.). BTW my daughter did grow up to be beautiful and capable and has yet to challenge us with an unsuitable boyfriend. (Knock on wood, keep fingers crossed, send good karma into the universe...)