

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of  
*It Happened One Autumn*

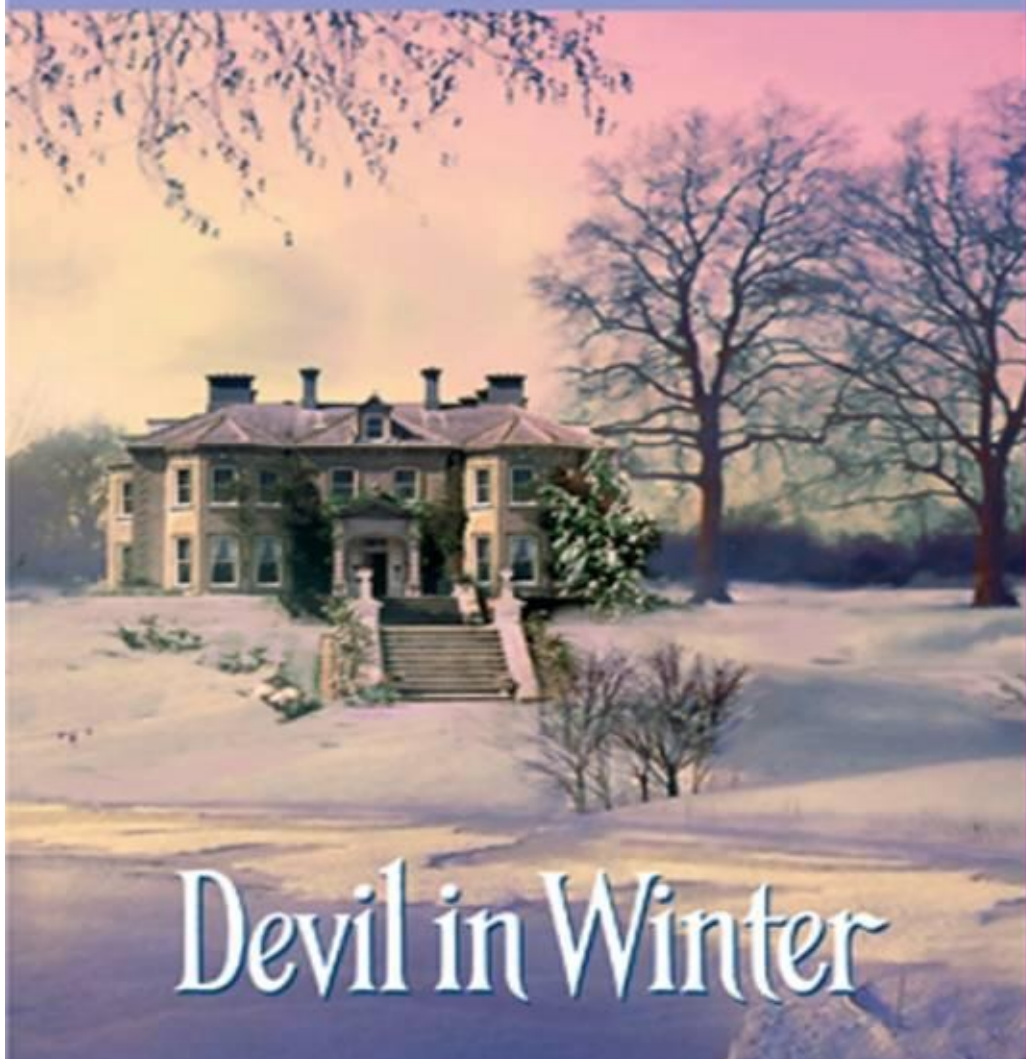
Lisa KLEYPAS



Devil in Winter

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# Devil in Winter

To Christina, Connie, Liz, Mary and Terri,

for friendship that makes my heart sing.

Love always,

L.K.

**“It’s not a love match,” St. Vincent said in a clipped voice.**

“It’s a marriage of convenience, and there’s not enough warmth between us to light a birthday candle. Get on with it, if you please. Neither of us has had a proper sleep in two days.”

Silence fell over the scene. Then the blacksmith’s heavy brows lowered over his eyes in a scowl. “I don’t like ye,” he announced.

St. Vincent regarded him with exasperation. “Neither does my bride-to-be. But since that’s not going to stop her from marrying me, it shouldn’t stop you, either. Go on.”

Evie fought to suppress a helpless titter of amusement. In spite of her fatigue—or perhaps because of it—she was beginning to take a perverse enjoyment in the sight of St. Vincent struggling to control his annoyance.

At the moment, the unshaven, ill-tempered man beside her bore no resemblance to the smug aristocrat who had attended Lord Westcliff’s house party.

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# Chapter 1

London, 1843

As Sebastian, Lord St. Vincent, stared at the young woman who had just barged her way into his London residence, it occurred to him that he might have tried to abduct the wrong heiress last week at Stony Cross Park.

Although kidnapping had not, until recently, been on Sebastian's long list of villainous acts, he really should have been more clever about it.

In retrospect Lillian Bowman had been a foolish choice, though at the time she had seemed the perfect solution to Sebastian's dilemma. Her family was wealthy, whereas Sebastian was titled and in financial straits. And Lillian herself had promised to be an entertaining bed partner, with her dark-haired beauty and her fiery temperament. He should have chosen far less spirited prey. Lillian Bowman, a lively American heiress, had put up fierce resistance to his plan until she had been rescued by her fiancé, Lord Westcliff.

Miss Evangeline Jenner, the lamblike creature who now stood before him, was as unlike Lillian Bowman as it was possible to be. Sebastian regarded her with veiled contempt, pondering what he knew of her. Evangeline was the only child of Ivo Jenner, the notorious London gambling club owner, and a mother who had run off with him—only to quickly realize her mistake. Though Evangeline's mother had come from decent lineage, her father was little better than gutter scum. Despite the inglorious pedigree, Evangeline might have made a decent enough match if not for her crippling shyness, which resulted in a torturous stammer.

Sebastian had heard men say grimly that they would wear a hair shirt until their skin was bloody rather than attempt a conversation with her. Naturally Sebastian had done his utmost to avoid her whenever possible. That had not been difficult. The timid Miss Jenner was wont to hide in corners. They had never actually spoken directly—a circumstance that had appeared to suit both of them quite well.

But there was no avoiding her now. For some reason Miss Jenner had seen fit to come uninvited to Sebastian's home at a scandalously late hour. To make the

situation even more compromising, she was unaccompanied—and spending more than a half minute alone with Sebastian was sufficient to ruin any girl. He was debauched, amoral, and perversely proud of it. He excelled at his chosen occupation—that of degenerate seducer—and he had set a standard few rakes could aspire to.

Relaxing in his chair, Sebastian watched with deceptive idleness as Evangeline Jenner approached. The library room was dark except for a small fire in the hearth, its flickering light playing gently over the young woman's face. She didn't look to be more than twenty, her complexion fresh, her eyes filled with the kind of innocence that never failed to arouse his disdain. Sebastian had never valued or admired innocence.

Though the gentlemanly thing would have been for him to rise from his chair, there seemed little point in making polite gestures under the circumstances. Instead, he motioned to the other chair beside the hearth with a negligent wave of his hand.

“Have a seat if you like,” he said. “Though I shouldn't plan to stay long if I were you. I'm easily bored, and your reputation is hardly that of a scintillating conversationalist.”

Evangeline didn't flinch at his rudeness. Sebastian couldn't help but wonder what kind of upbringing had inured her so thoroughly to insult, when any other girl would have flushed or burst into tears. Either she was a pea wit, or she had remarkable nerve.

Removing her cloak, Evangeline draped it over one arm of the velvet-upholstered chair, and sat without grace or artifice. Wallflower, Sebastian thought, recalling that she was friends not only with Lillian Bowman, but also with Lillian's younger sister, Daisy, and with Annabelle Hunt. The group of four young women had sat at the side of numerous balls and soirees all last season, a band of perpetual wallflowers. However, it seemed that their bad luck had changed, for Annabelle had finally managed to catch a husband, and Lillian had just brought Lord Westcliff up to scratch. Sebastian doubted that their good fortune would extend to this bumbling creature.

Though he was tempted to demand her purpose in visiting him, Sebastian feared

that might set off a round of prolonged stammering that would torment them both. He waited with forced patience, while Evangeline appeared to consider what she was about to say. As the silence drew out, Sebastian watched her in the gamboling firelight, and realized with some surprise that she was attractive. He had never really looked at her directly, had only received the impression of a frowsy red-haired girl with bad posture. But she was lovely.

As Sebastian stared at her, he became aware of a slight tension building in his muscles, tiny hairs rising on the back of his neck. He remained relaxed in his chair, though the tips of his fingers made slight depressions in the soft-napped velvet upholstery. He found it odd that he had never noticed her, when there was a great deal worth noticing. Her hair, the brightest shade of red he had ever seen, seemed to feed on the firelight, glowing with incandescent heat. The slender wings of her brows and the heavy fringe of her lashes were a darker shade of auburn, while her skin was that of a true redhead, fair and a bit freckled on the nose and cheeks. Sebastian was amused by the festive scattering of little gold flecks, sprinkled as if by the whim of a friendly fairy. She had unfashionably full lips that were colored a natural rose, and large, round blue eyes...pretty but emotionless eyes, like those of a wax doll.

"I r-received word that my friend Miss Bowman is now Lady Westcliff," Evangeline remarked in a careful manner. "She and the earl went on to Gr-Gretna Green after he...dispatched you."

"Beat me to a pulp'would be a more accurate choice of words," Sebastian said pleasantly, knowing that she couldn't help but notice the shadowy bruises on his jaw from Westcliff's righteous pummeling. "He didn't seem to take it well, my borrowing of his betrothed."

"You k-kidnapped her," Evangeline countered calmly. "'Borrowing' implies that you intended to give her back."

Sebastian felt his lips curve with his first real smile in a long time. She wasn't a simpleton, apparently. "Kidnapped, then, if you're going to be precise. Is that why you've come to visit, Miss Jenner? To deliver a report on the happy couple? I'm weary of the subject. You had better say something interesting soon, or I'm afraid you'll have to leave."