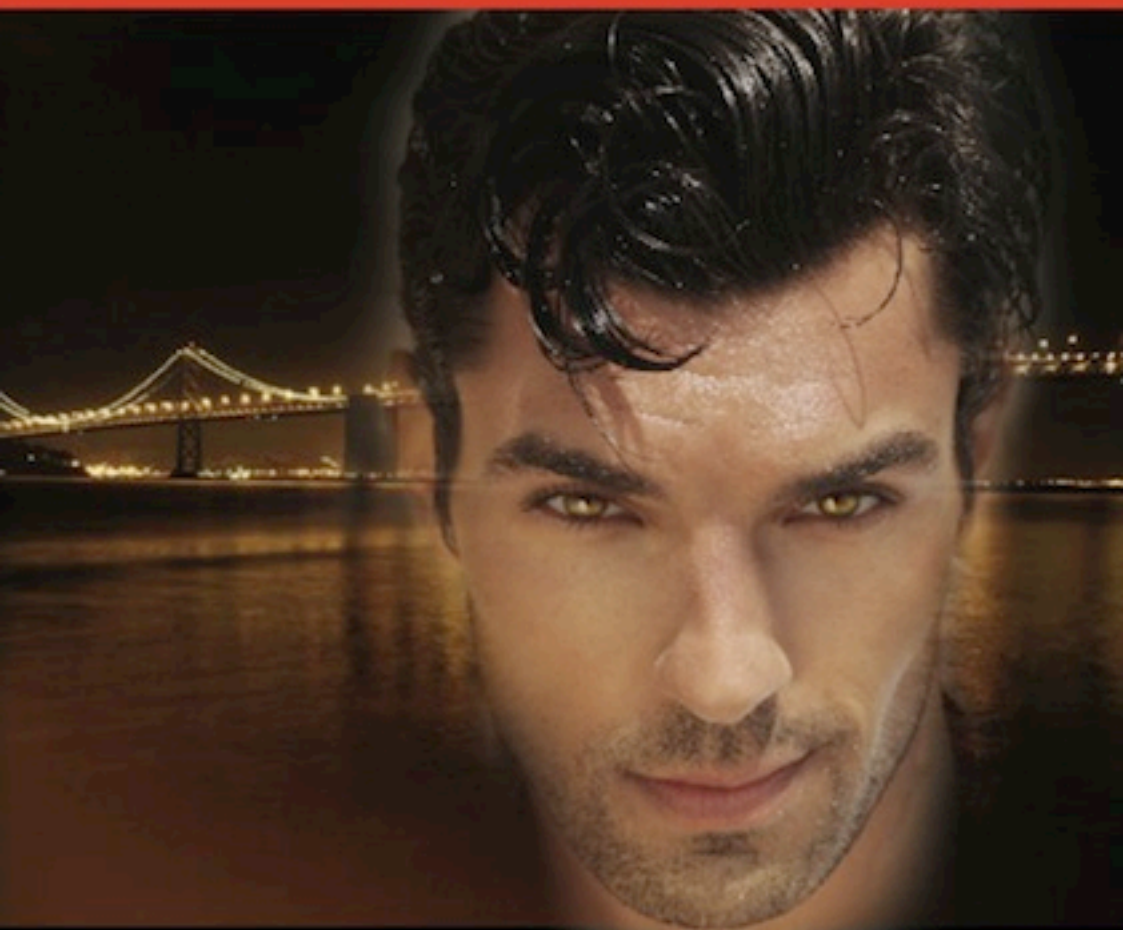
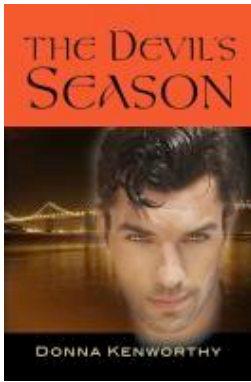


THE DEVIL'S SEASON



DONNA KENWORTHY



***THE DEVIL'S SEASON** is a supernatural novel that deals with faith and atheism, religion and personal spirituality, and the psyche's shadow and altruistic sides. The setting is Tidewater, Virginia, located at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The characters are everyday people who are lured into danger with irreparable consequences by demonic forces. The heroine, an avowed atheist, undergoes a complete transformation of consciousness through a near-death experience, and returns to life re-born.*

The Devil's Season

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THE DEVIL'S
SEASON

A NOVEL

DONNA KENWORTHY

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ONE

A pedestrian in a wide-brimmed derby walked by a brick ranch style house that resembled thousands of others in the Tidewater area of Virginia. The grass had returned to green from its winter hue of dried hay. Boxwood and holly bushes were neatly trimmed to a height just below the windows, and the woodwork and shutters looked handsome in a fresh coat of black paint. The overall appearance of the house was emblematic of wholesome, middle-class, suburban America.

The man stopped in front of the house and cocked his head to listen to a loud voice coming through the open windows. He must have found the words comical, for he laughed so hard that he bent over at the waist and slapped his leg. When he straightened up, he shook his head vigorously from side to side as if to dislodge the words. Before continuing his stroll, he adjusted his hat by pulling it low on his forehead. With a last quick look at the house, he flipped the inhabitants the finger and went on his way with a jaunty step.



Inside the comfortable abode, the comely housewife spewed forth dire warnings brimming with fear as spawned by a dozen or more televangelists in preparation for the *End Times*. Many of these preachers had come up with specific dates for the destruction of the world. In Miami, outspoken Rabbi Waldheim prophesized the Messiah would arrive in Jerusalem during the High Holy Days. Followers of these religious leaders were working themselves up into a feverish frenzy of anticipation.

The dining room was filled with lingering aromas of roast beef and fried potatoes, and the table was still laden with dessert plates decorated with remnants of peach cobbler and vanilla ice cream. In this room where comfort food satisfied the palate as well as the

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appetite, actual comfort was not at hand, for high-pitched warnings of doom rang out as the housewife reached the peak of her loud diatribe.

“Marisa, wake up to the truth, or the devil will snatch you up. And when he does, you will be eternally damned! You must protect yourself!

Jill, her friend since childhood, had switched churches again. With each move, she would swing more into a fire and brimstone mentality. Now in the throes of her staunch fundamentalism, she behaved as if her own salvation depended on taking Marisa to heaven along with her.

In Marisa’s ears, she sounded like a raving lunatic. How could Jill experience joy in her religious devotion with her full attention on evil and predictions of doomsday? Her mindset was completely fear based, regardless what she said about being filled with the spirit. It seemed to Marisa that by focusing on darkness and the devil, she had already put herself in a mental state of hell.

She remembered her cousin Amy, a psychologist, once telling her that people often became mentally ill in religious ways, believing God or the devil was talking to them. Some of her patients had confessed to committing heinous acts due to imagined coaxing by evil spirits.

“Jill, as a college educated person, I cannot believe you think all this devil stuff is true.”

“All those science books kept me from the truth. But now I know that only by loving Jesus and fearing the devil can you escape an eternity of pain and suffering. Do you hear me, Marisa?”

“How could I not hear you? They probably can hear you in New York.”

But in actuality she turned a deaf ear to Jill’s paranoia. She leaned on the table and covered her ears with her hands, just as she did as a child to block out the sounds of the religious war between her

parents. She often hid in the hall closet on top of a pile of extra blankets and pillows. With her body folded into a fetal position, her thumb became her pacifier. The regression to infancy brought her a sense of security. In that cozy womb of the small closet, the hostile voices turned muffled and distant.

Jill's efforts at persuasion resurrected the painful past of her early home life. Her ranting tirade brought back memories of her angry parents pitted against each other. All she wanted was to escape from Jill's house.

"You're a stupid papist! How could you think a human being is infallible? Only God is perfect – and his Son!" her mother insisted.

"You don't understand the papacy," her father would say. "Regardless who holds the position, the office itself is infallible."

"But the office is enlivened by a fallible human being!"

"Salvation is only possible through the blessed and holy Catholic Church. You can't do it by yourself as hard as you may try."

"How dare you say that to me!" her appalled mother would retort. "My faith could move mountains!"

Each condemnation uttered by her parents was like a knife stabbing her in the heart. She loved them both and wished with her entire being that they would cease their religious arguments. Inside her head, she yelled, *Stop it! Shut up!* Of course her parents could not hear Marisa's silent pleas, nor did they ever consider the effect their fighting had on their only child.

The screaming and hurling of insults went on and on with regularity especially after church. Marisa was dragged to a different place of worship each Sunday. On alternate weeks, she would attend either Transfiguration Catholic Church or Tidewater Missionary Church. Instead of returning home more peaceful and loving, her parents came back steaming with anger and resentment at the other

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spouse, much of it having to do with their own guilt over not marrying within the faith of their families.

She grew up detesting Sundays. The altercations began over lunch. After the meal, her family would visit her grandparents who would add more anguish to her position. Each side of the family did nothing but complain about her parents' marriage. "They should never have gotten married in the first place" was the conclusion of all the in-laws. Listening to this judgment made Marisa feel her existence was a mistake. It would have been better if she had never been born.

Jill reached over to pat her friend's arm. Marisa jumped as if she had been scalded by hot water.

"I want you to come to church with me and meet Pastor Jack Edwards. He'll explain everything to you much better than I ever could. How about this Sunday? We could stay after the service ends and have a private discussion, just the three of us. I could set it up beforehand."

"No, thanks. And please don't ask me again. I've worked hard to create a peaceful life. I've managed it only by rejecting all religious dogma," she said. "Listen, Jill, if I don't even believe in God, how could I believe in the devil?"

Jill's jaw dropped open upon hearing her claim of atheism.

In the midst of her friend's fervent religiosity, Marisa felt like a trapped animal. She had to get out of there before she told Jill she was nothing but a fool. So she contrived an excuse and convinced Jill that she had a pounding headache and needed to go home, take a couple of aspirins, and try to sleep it off.



After taking her leave, Marisa realized she lacked the desire to go straight home where the phone would ring with a pleading sound until midnight, alerting her that relatives and friends hungered for her ear,

so they could empty their minds of the latest turmoil or the same old problems she had already heard. None of these people considered less than a forty-five minute phone call a full conversation. Not that she said much on her end. Mainly she listened as they vented their frustrations about how their husbands, children, car mechanics, and the exorbitant price of gasoline were making them miserable, angry, and sad. Marisa was usually inclined to listen patiently and give emotional support, but tonight she simply was not in the mood.

What she required now was “me” time to replenish her energies after the visit with Jill. She felt zapped of her strength due to the constant badgering. As she was leaving, her friend uttered a final warning: “Marisa, you must curse the devil before it’s too late.”

Instead of going home, she pulled into the parking lot of a Starbucks. She deemed its prices a total extravagance, but tonight she deserved some kind of indulgence. Since she felt like a survivor of a torture chamber, she sought the comfort of hot tea to soothe her nerves and quiet the echoing of Jill’s screeching voice inside her head.

When she entered the coffee house, she almost turned around and marched right out. She forgot it was Friday night. The crowd seemed to push against her as she wended her way toward the counter. Luck was on her side, though, she thought gratefully, when she spotted the only available table in the back. She grabbed a newspaper from the stand and set it on the table in hopes that no one would sit there while she purchased orange flavored tea and a slice of pound cake.

She breathed in the scent of oranges, savored the first sip, and felt its warmth soothe the back of her throat. She emitted a sigh of contentment. With the second sip, her entire body began to relax. She was glad she made this stop before going home.

“May I sit here? As you can see, there isn’t any other seat available, even outside,” said an attractive man in his mid-forties.

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What could she say? It would be rude to declare she wanted to be alone to enjoy precious moments of peace. She hoped he would not be intrusive.

“Of course.” she said, “Please have a seat.”

The stranger turned his chair to face the room instead of angling it in her direction. He seemed intent on observing all the customers and employees, moving his glance from one to another. In this day and age, it was somewhat surprising his attention was not absorbed by a computer or a cell phone.

Realizing she had been staring at him, she diverted her gaze to the newspaper she had placed on the table. The words on the front page were nothing but a blur. There was no way to ignore the man with whom she sat. His mere presence was compelling.

When she looked up at him, he was staring at her. He wore his thick brown hair in short soft ringlets, which framed his chiseled features. The thin bridge of his nose was accentuated by nostrils that flared with an aristocratic architecture. The stranger smiled in a friendly way that seemed like an invitation to conversation.

Maybe she misinterpreted the smile. In a social situation, she was the type of person who melted into the woodwork around strangers. She recognized there was nothing alluring or attractive about her appearance. She looked like an average middle-aged woman. Aside from her curly red hair, she possessed no attributes to draw attention her way.

His friendly face drew her out.

“This is a first for me,” she stated. “I don’t usually go out alone at night. I’m always anxious to get home from work and kick off my shoes. As soon as I finish my tea, you’ll be able to have the table all to yourself.”

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“Don’t hurry on my account. I like meeting people and getting to know them. You said you worked. What exactly do you do?”

“I’m in charge of the interior design department at Forman’s Furniture Store.”

“So, that tells me you have an appreciation for the finer things.”

“But not the pocketbook to afford them! However, I do feel lucky to be surrounded by beauty. Forman’s is known for its charming vignettes. Each one looks like a completed room because nothing is left out. They contain all the accessories one would find in a person’s home like lamps, pictures on the wall, knickknacks on the tables, and books on the shelves. They even have mock electronics.”

The stranger seemed interested in her comments.

“What about yourself? What kind of work do you do?” she inquired.

“I’m a counselor. Most of the people who want my help are basically okay. Due to boredom or frustration with the course of their lives, they seek me out due to a desire for a more satisfying life.”

As he replied, he looked directly at her. She returned his gaze and looked straight into his entrancing amber eyes. With a jolt of fear, she saw another pair of eyes behind the eyes that stared at her. Eyes behind eyes – evil eyes – beady eyes that could belong to another face entirely. A wave of nausea assailed her. She grabbed the edge of the table to steady herself. To her relief, as quickly as the nausea swept through her, it disappeared.

Whenever she experienced an intuitive vision of a double set of eyes in the past, it turned out that the person who possessed them was a liar and untrustworthy. Was this also true about the man seated across from her? It was hard to believe. He looked so clean-cut in the black crew neck sweater and gray flannel pleated trousers. It must

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have been her imagination. Anyway, it did not really matter, since she probably would never see him again.

Yet, she could not get the vision out of her mind. Instead of lingering over the hot tea, she downed it in a hurry, wrapped the pound cake in a napkin to take with her, and excused herself.

“Oh, dear, I totally forgot that I told my neighbor I’d show her how to crochet tonight. I must get going.”

Like a gentleman, the stranger stood as she walked away.

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On the way home, Marisa thought about the man who shared her table at Starbucks, and also the two uncharacteristic fibs she told tonight – first the headache and then the crocheting lesson. It was unlike her to be untruthful. Both times, she had felt such a strong urge to escape. Part of her wondered if she had stayed at Starbucks, would the stranger have tried to pick her up. But she immediately dismissed the thought. He was so good looking, handsome actually, and here she was with a plain face full of freckles that only heavy make-up could hide. But she did not bother with any camouflage. He would never be interested in going out with someone like her. And she was certain she was many years older than he. The mere thought of dating him was ridiculous. Although he did not wear a wedding ring, she doubted he ever lacked for female companionship.

She tried to get her mind off the man, but his image seemed burned onto her inner vision. She wondered if it would ever go away. That night, she even dreamed of him. They walked together hand-in-hand along the shore of a lake. For some reason, the water was red and not blue.



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