

*Something
Wicked*

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by
Jo Beverley



A TOPAZ BOOK

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 REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

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To my agent, Alice Harron Orr,
who is supportive in every way.
And to all the patient readers
who are “waiting for Rothgar.”
One day. I promise.

Chapter 1

London, June 1762

"I'm going to miss you." Lady Elfled Malloren went into her twin brother's arms, determined not to cry.

"Now there's a change," he said gruffly. "It's going to be strange all over again after this year together."

Captain Lord Cynric Malloren was dressed for official travel in full red-coated military glory, including powdered hair tied back neatly with a black bow.

Beneath a frivolous lace cap, Elf's hair glinted its natural sandy gold, and she wore a white gown scattered with embroidered forget-me-nots.

Even so, the resemblance was unmistakable.

"I wish you weren't going so *far*," she complained. "Nova Scotia. It will be years—"

He put his fingers over her unsteady lips. "Hush. I've been away for years before, and you'll soon be absorbed in your own life again."

She pulled a face and moved out of his arms. "Don't *you* start preaching of the benefits of the wedded state!"

He glanced smiling at his wife, waiting tactfully by the hall door, chatting to his brother, the Marquess of Rothgar. "Marriage suits me, and you and I are very much alike."

Are we? Elf wanted to ask, but now was hardly the time to raise troubling questions. "Then I'll consider the applicants again," she said lightly, adding with a teasing grimace, "—of course it might help if my devoted brothers didn't chase off all the more interesting ones!"

He winked. "Takes a scoundrel to know one. We'd best be off." But he made no move to leave, even though a coach and six restless horses waited outside.

"Go. I hate long farewells." She kissed him quickly, then dragged him toward his wife and the door to adventure.

She kissed her sister-in-law, Chastity, on the cheek. "Write before you sail." They hugged, clinging for a moment, for they'd become close

friends. "Take care of him," Elf whispered, having to fight tears all over again.

"Of course." Chastity pulled free to blow her nose. "If I thought there was any point, I'd ask you to take care of Fort in turn." She referred to her brother, now Earl of Walgrave.

"I can well imagine *his* reaction to such a suggestion."

They shared a look, for Chastity's brother hated all Mallorens.

Behind them, two footmen swung open the big double doors, letting in summer sun and birdsong. The marquess and Cyn moved onto the steps outside, waiting.

"Keep an eye on him, at least," Chastity said.

"My dear. The places he haunts? I'd lose my reputation in a moment!"

"Not these days." Chastity pulled a face. "I never thought to complain about a brother's reform, but Fort as a careless rake was a great deal more pleasant than Lord Walgrave, the cynical moralist." She pulled on her gloves. "I do worry about leaving him like this. He's not the same since Father's death."

Elf linked arms and led her to the door. "Then I will play guardian angel. If I hear he's in the suds—about to be beheaded for bloody-minded arrogance, for example—I'll charge to his rescue like Joan of Arc!" With a grin, Elf added, "Mainly to annoy him."

Chastity chuckled, but added, "He's not so bad, Elf. It's just—"

"It's just that he thinks all Mallorens lower than worms, and treats me accordingly."

Chastity sighed and abandoned the argument, turning to join her husband and the marquess, who was traveling with them to Portsmouth.

Too soon all was ready. Elf watched from the steps as the three settled into the gilded coach. At a word, the coachman cracked his whip and the six horses took the weight of the splendid vehicle. Soon it turned out of Marlborough Square, both Cyn and Chastity leaning out for a final wave.

Passersby had stopped to watch the departure. Now they clicked into motion like clockwork toys—idlers strolled on, servants resumed their tasks, and children returned to games.

As the world filled the space where Cyn had been, Elf bit her lip, regretting the fact that she'd chosen to say good-bye here instead of at the ship. But she did hate lingering farewells, and in the end it would have hurt just as much.

She thought she'd gone through the worst of this seven years ago when Cyn had virtually run away to join the army. For a while she'd even hated him for leaving her, though she'd known he could never settle to the life Rothgar had planned for him. The law, for heaven's sake. One of her oldest brother's less perceptive ideas.

Cyn needed action and challenge.

He'd been home four times in seven years, and she really had thought she'd grown up and detached enough not to miss him. But when he'd come home last year, he'd been deathly ill, and for the first time she'd faced the prospect of really losing him. His recovery had taken months. Then his marriage, and the arrangements for his new post as aide to the governor of Nova Scotia had taken more.

The tendrils had grown deep into her again.

Now it was like losing a part of herself, and losing him more absolutely because of his marriage. She loved Chastity dearly, and didn't begrudge either of them their happiness, but it did sadden her that her twin had someone else in his life, someone, perhaps, as close as they had been.

She realized that she was standing staring at nothing, the two footmen waiting like statues to close the doors. With a sigh, she turned and reentered her home.

As she did so, she finally admitted to thoughts that had lurked in her mind for some time.

She envied her twin.

His life made hers painful.

In some ways, she was glad that Cyn was going far away.

As the footmen closed the door behind her, shutting out sunshine and birdsong, she acknowledged that her beloved twin had been a very uncomfortable presence over this past year.

Listening to his stories, enjoying his adventures, it had gradually dawned on her that she had done *nothing* with the past seven years. Oh certainly she had attended any number of balls, routs, and musical evenings—and arranged a good many of them too. She had traveled between London and Rothgar Abbey in Berkshire, and even—mad adventure this!—to Bath and Versailles.

Some would think she lived a full life, for she managed her brother's homes and was blessed by many good friends. But listening to stories of travel to foreign lands, of battles won and lost, of shipwreck and snake bite, she had come to see that she had done nothing even slightly challenging.

With a start, she realized that yet again she was standing staring into space, this time in the middle of the paneled hall. Picking up her delicate skirts, she climbed the sweeping stairs, heading for the privacy of her suite of rooms.

Movement, however, didn't stop the thoughts from tumbling out of the dark corners of her mind, taking on clarity and a frightening form.

Cyn was newly wed and setting off on another adventure. At twenty-five, he was considered to be on the brink of a promising and fruitful life.

She, however—at the same age—was seen as an aging spinster destined to spend her life in a boring round. She would care for her brother's homes, love her siblings' children, but have neither home nor children of her own.

And she was a virgin.

Her steps quickened, and she rushed into her pretty boudoir to close the door behind her, to lean against it as if pursued.

Why had her virginity become the crystalline heart of her unhappiness? How nonsensical.

After all, Cyn had never kept much from her, and she'd known they'd differed in this for years. He'd enjoyed his first woman at seventeen—Cassie Wickworth of the Abbey dairy. Later, he'd visited some select brothels, and even enjoyed a brief, hilarious affair with an older married lady, though he hadn't told Elf her name. In the army, she was sure he'd not been celibate.

Such matters had never made her feel deprived before. These things were different for men and she'd been prepared to wait for marriage to be enlightened.

Accepting that the door did not need guarding, that the enemy was in fact within, she went to sit on her cream brocade chaise. It was Cyn's marriage, she decided, that had given her own celibacy such splinter-sharp edges.

She'd never before had to witness him going nightly to a woman while she retired to her solitary state. It hadn't helped, of course, that she'd learned about some of the adventures he'd shared with Chastity before their marriage. That, added to their open love and delight, to their way of touching or just looking at each other, had driven home the fact that Elf was missing a very important part of life.

And that she probably always would.

After all, a lady's virginity was a hard thing to lose outside marriage, especially when the lady had four brothers who would kill any man who obliged her.

She rose to study herself in her long mirror. With her decorous hairstyle crowned by a white lacy cap, she was the very image of a spinster lady. Of course, her white dress decorated with tiny forget-me-nots made her into the very image of virgin, too.

A *youthful* virgin.

It seemed absurd, though she couldn't imagine how a virginal spinster of twenty-five was *supposed* to dress. Since everyone agreed she had no taste in these matters, she left it all to her maid.

She turned away to pace the room, thinking of the simple solution to all her woes.

Marriage.

That was Cyn's prescription, but he'd found his soul mate and she hadn't. She enjoyed the company of men, and didn't lack for suitors. She had never met any man, however, who created magic in her; never one who could push her beyond the cool control of her mind into doing something foolish.

Something wicked . . .

Was it ridiculous to expect it?

Cyn had found it. His willingness to risk anything for Chastity, their abandonment to each other outside marriage, stood as proof of the power of love.

Another of her brothers, Bryght, had fallen into the magic stew with Portia St. Claire so that his brilliant, logical mind had been unable to do anything but work to win her.

Her friend Amanda was besotted with her husband, and miserable whenever he had to leave for a few days on government business.

Elf had never experienced anything close to that kind of madness. Surely, if it lay in her destiny, it would have happened by now.

Unless she lived too tamely to open herself to Cupid's magic arrow . . . ?

Turning back to the mirror, she pulled off her demure cap and tossed it aside, scattering pins so that her sandy curls bounced around her shoulders.

But then she sighed. She was no man's secret fantasy.

How unfair that Cyn was prettier than she was! He had inherited their mother's remarkable green-gold eyes and thick lashes as well as her russet-gold hair. Elf's eyes were a duller version of that color, and her lashes the same sandy brown as her hair. They both had their father's firm chin. It looked well on a military officer, but less so on a lady.

Impatiently, she shrugged off these pointless thoughts. Chins and eyes could not be changed, and she wasn't about to try dyeing her hair. Perhaps face paint . . . ?

"Ah, milady! Vous être prêt?"

Elf started, and turned to her maid. Of course, she was to spend a few days with Amanda. Her sedan chair was doubtless waiting.

"Bien sûr, Chantal."

As always when they were alone together, maid and mistress spoke French. Chantal was French born, and Elf's mother had been French, raising her children to be perfectly bilingual.

Elf continued in that language. "Have my things been sent around?"

"Of course, milady. And your chair awaits. But what has happened to your cap, milady?"

Elf knew she was blushing. "Oh, it looked a little crooked."

Chantal tutted, steering Elf to her dressing table so that hair and lacy confection could be restored to perfect order.

Elf pushed away her troubling thoughts. They were merely a passing cloud brought on by saying good-bye. A few days with Amanda would drive away the blue devils.

The next morning, Elf entered Amanda's boudoir to find her childhood friend sitting at a small breakfast table, but gazing morosely out of the window.

"Is something the matter?"

Amanda started. "Oh, Elf! Well, it's a blessing you are here or I would be deserted indeed!"

Amanda Lessington was a handsome brunette, of similar height to Elf but much more rounded. She was blessed with dramatic dark eyes and full lips that Elf had always envied.

Elf sat down opposite her friend. "What's happened?"

"Stephen's gone. Something *dreadfully* important has come up in Bristol. Bristol, I ask you!" With a wave of her hand, Amanda dismissed one of England's major seaports.

Elf knew Amanda's problem with Bristol was simply that she hated her husband's frequent journeys. "It will doubtless only be for a few days."

"A week. A whole week. And you don't realize the implications! The wretched man has left us without dependable escort. Unless," she added with a sharp look, "your brothers can be dragged in to do duty. It would serve Stephen right if I spent the evening on Rothgar's arm!"

Elf suppressed a grin. "Is that your secret fantasy? I wish I could make it true, dearest, but he's traveling to Portsmouth with Cyn."

"Bryght?" asked Amanda hopefully.

Elf shook her head. "Down at Candleford, and pretty well fixed there now Portia's close to her time."

"Brand?"

"Gone north on family business. That's part of the reason I'm here. They weren't happy at leaving me alone."

"Alack," said Amanda with a moody sigh. "So we are both cruelly deserted."

Elf helped herself to a slice of ham and a brioche. "Not exactly . . ."

Her discontented thoughts had not gone away. They'd kept her from sleep half the night and this new scenario seemed to feed them like dry logs on a fire. As she poured herself some chocolate from the china pot, she contemplated exciting, terrifying notions.

"Not deserted, Amanda," she said at last. "Without protectors."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not to my mind." Elf cut a piece of ham, then savored the spicy taste along with the spicy ideas dancing around in her brain. "I've always been afraid of involving one of my fire-eating protectors in a duel, so I've had to behave with complete propriety. But now, none of them are around. Perhaps I can finally have an adventure."

"Adventure?" asked Amanda warily. "What kind of adventure?"

"Oh, something wicked, of course." Then Elf grinned at her friend's expression. "Not really. But let's go to Vauxhall."

"Vauxhall? That's hardly a wicked adventure. We've both been there a score of times."

"Without an escort. Tonight. To the Midsummer Night's masquerade."

Amanda gaped. "You're not serious!"

"Many members of society attend such masked events."

"Many *men*, you mean."

Perfectly aware of surrendering to a wild mood, Elf asked, "And why should they have all the fun?"

"I'm not sure it sounds like fun."

From whim, the notion had become insistent. Elf felt she would go mad if she didn't do *something*, something different. She leaned forward. "Let's, Amanda. I promise not to be madly rash. We'll wear dominoes. No one will know us." She took Amanda's hand. "I just want to see what it's like to be someone else for a night."

"Who?" Amanda wailed.

"I don't know. But not Lady Elfled Malloren, sister of the mighty Marquess of Rothgar—*Beware who trespass here!* Just an ordinary woman . . ."

After a moment, Amanda squeezed her hand. "Elf, I haven't seen you like this since we were children. I always thought Cyn was the ringleader in all our pranks."

"Perhaps Cyn and I are very alike."

"Perhaps you are, indeed."

"Amanda, I need to do this."

"So I see . . ." But Amanda frowned in concern. "I am responsible for you in a way."

"I'm six months older than you!"

"But I'm the married woman." She eyed her friend, brown eyes serious. "You promise we'll stay together?"

"Of course. Where's your adventurous spirit? You were never so timid when we were children."

"Because we *were* children. I *don't* think it will be fun. I think it will be crowded, sweaty, and noisy." She studied Elf for a moment, then smiled.

“But if you want to have an adventure, my dear, an adventure you will have.”

Ten hours later, Elf raised her silken skirts high to step out of the boat and onto the stone of Vauxhall Stairs. Excitement bubbled in her in a way she'd not experienced since she and Cyn had been wild youngsters together.

Both she and Amanda were dressed *en grand domino*—hooped gowns hidden by loose silken cloaks, white-powered hair concealed by deep hoods. Molded white leather masks covered their faces from hairline to lips. Even if they were unfortunate enough to encounter a close relative, they would not be recognized.

Amanda's domino was silvery blue, Elf's a vivid scarlet. In fact, they had switched for the night.

Elf suspected this might be her only chance for wild adventure and she was determined to make the most of it. Chantal—a tyrant supported by everyone Elf knew—insisted strong reds were impossible with pale skin and gingerish hair. Even if Elf purchased red clothing, it always disappeared.

Tonight, however, with her powdered hair and anonymity, Elf had persuaded Amanda to switch dominoes. Then she had insisted Chantal find a certain scarlet-striped dress with coquelicot-red petticoat. Of course Chantal—the wretch—had protested it was stained beyond hope.

“And how,” Elf had demanded, “could it be soiled when it has never been worn?”

Chantal, despite her unadventurous taste, was impeccably honest. She had eventually found the gown and petticoat in a box in the attics of Malloren House. When commanded, she had even found some red-and-white striped stockings and a certain stomacher of black-and-red satin trimmed with gold lace. But there had been tears in her eyes as she unwrapped the latter. “Not with the coquelicot, milady! Please!”

Elf had been resolute, though even easygoing Amanda had blinked at her ensemble and suggested that perhaps the stomacher might be *de trop*.

Elf, however, had worn it all. She might never have another opportunity to dress just as she wished. She might never have another opportunity for adventure. She intended to enjoy tonight to the very last drop.

Tonight she was not Elfed Malloren, well-behaved lady, but a new creature entirely.

Lisette, she had christened the scarlet lady in the mirror. Lisette Belhardi, which translated roughly to bold-and-beautiful. Mademoiselle Lisette, visiting from Paris, and bolder by far than Elfed Malloren could ever be.