



## Wicked As Sin: A Novel (The Boscastles)

By Jillian Hunter

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Award-winning author Jillian Hunter has written a deliciously sexy new novel rife with sly wit, perilous temptation, and breathless passion.

Handsome cavalry officer Sir Gabriel Boscastle returns from Waterloo a hero, only to resume his pursuit of forbidden pleasures in London. There is no bet this cynical gentleman will not take—and no woman he cannot seduce. But when he travels to the country manor he wins during a card game, he discovers there is one gamble he has never risked and that he may have met his match. His opponent and neighbor is none other than Alethea Claridge, the only person who stood by him during his wildest years and the only woman ever to captivate his heart.

The beautiful and solitary Lady Alethea is seemingly still mourning for her fiancé, who died in battle. But beneath her shield of feigned sorrow, she hides an unspeakable secret—one that could destroy her reputation forever. So when this dark horseman thunders back into her life one night, she is understandably wary of him. She had defended Gabriel once when he was a wicked boy. But now, as a beguiling man, he makes his sensual desires well known even as he swears he will reform. Will the irresistible scoundrel redeem himself and restore her trust in love or ruin her completely? She will soon have her answer as Gabriel challenges everything she believes about love, about herself, and about what it takes to be a hero.

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Jillian Hunter is the author of eighteen critically acclaimed novels, and has received several awards, including the Romantic Times Career Achievement Award. Hunter lives in Southern California with her husband and three daughters.

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### Chapter One

Enfield, England 1816

The devil had come to take possession of Helbourne Hall. It was an event not entirely surprising considering the manor house's recent history of wicked deed-holders. Lady Alethea Claridge could not properly discern the details of her neighbor's undignified arrival through the cracked spyglass she held to the window. What she managed to perceive, however, brought scant comfort to one who had sought seclusion from Society's ill-behaved gentlemen. She and the two servants who stood beside her in the long gallery of her brother's house watched the horseman in spellbound silence.

As she reconsidered her dramatic comparison of this person to Mephistopheles, she realized it could more kindly be said that he resembled a dark knight from the misty ages on a mission of rampage. This image might have brought more reassurance had she understood the nature of his quest.

The tall, darkly cloaked usurper sat his beautiful black Andalusian as if leading a cavalry brigade. He thundered down the moonlit hill with an apocalyptic disregard for safety or decorum.

Was he on the attack or on the run? She did not see anyone chasing after him.

"The innkeeper's wife said he'd been half-killed at Waterloo," Mrs. Sudley, the housekeeper, said under her breath, crowding in for a closer look. "Hideous scars on his neck from an injury that would have done in a normal man."

"I thought you'd stopped listening to gossip," Alethea murmured. "Furthermore, unless he is a ghost, that foolhardy display of horsemanship could not have been accomplished by a man not in the prime of his physical abilities."

Mrs. Sudley's loud sniff indicated that she had taken offense. "I only listened to the village talk to learn about him for your sake, Lady Alethea."

"For my sake?" Alethea glanced at her askance. "What do I have to do with him?"

Mrs. Sudley frowned. "It is vital to your welfare to know whether he will prove a kind guardian to his estate."

Alethea sighed at this unlikely possibility. "How many 'kind' guardians rob a man of his home in a card game, may I ask?"

“He’s from London, apparently,” Mrs. Sudley added in a tone of voice that said he might as well have sprung up from the underworld.

She smiled. “Not everyone from London—”

A spine-tingling ululation rose into the tranquillity of the country night. Alethea glimpsed a flash of steel in the horseman’s upraised hand—not the medieval shield she would have preferred a neighbor to brandish but rather a sword. Her scalp pricked in foreboding.

“Dear heaven,” she said, her brown eyes wide with astonishment. “It sounds as if he has given a battle cry. Is he planning to attack his own home?”

“He’s woke up every child and dog in the village,” her stoop-shouldered footman muttered with an ominous shake of his head. “Just listen to that bedeviled howlin’. He’ll be raisin’ the dead next with his carry-on. ’Tisn’t decent. I say we lock all the doors and arm ourselves until his lordship comes home.”

“He’ll be dead himself if he doesn’t heed where he’s going,” Alethea said in alarm. “He’s approaching the old bridge. He’ll never make it going—”

“—like a bat out of hell,” the footman muttered with relish. “Good riddance is what I think.”

She shot him a stern look. “Then keep those thoughts to yourself, Kemble.”

The housekeeper lifted her blue-veined hand to her eyes. “I cannot bear to stand witness. Tell me when it’s over, and if the news is bad, be gentle in describing the manner of his death. I’ve a weak stomach for gore and such.”

“Here,” the footman said impatiently. “There’s a warning sign standin’ right in front of that bridge unless them little ruffians from the parish orphanage took it down again. The fool can only blame himself if he breaks his neck.”

Alethea shook her head of sable-brown curls in exasperation. “One cannot argue that. However, it will not be the horse’s fault if his rider doesn’t bother to read it. It’s beyond irresponsible.”

She banged her fist helplessly upon the window as the reckless horseman wheeled and guided his horse into the woods that led to the bridge, the most direct route to Helbourne Hall.

“No,” she said aloud, her oval face paling. “Stop. Stop before—”

Of course he could not hear; how absurd to even attempt a warning. The rider had vanished from her sight into the thin stretch of trees that divided the lower lands of the two estates. She backed away from the window. She would not forgive herself if the horse took a fatal fall through the rotten bridge onto the sharp-toothed rocks below. The fact that it was not her brother’s bridge to maintain, but that of whoever happened to own Helbourne Hall, did not matter at the moment.

“Let the dogs loose, Cooper,” she instructed the second footman, who had come running to the top of the staircase upon hearing all the commotion. “Mrs. Sudley, bring me my boots and—”

“Shall I boil some water, my lady? And fetch a warm, clean blanket?”

“I doubt he’s going to give birth,” Alethea said in amusement. “However, a flask of brandy would not hurt. Even if I only use it to restore my nerves.” She cast one last worried look out the window. “Perhaps he’s hoping to kill himself. I might be so inclined if I had to take responsibility for that place.”

Helbourne Hall, the estate whose arable lands neighbored the well-tended acreage that belonged to Alethea’s brother, had been surrendered a month ago in a London gaming hall by its frivolous owner to an unidentified master. The once-grand Georgian manor seemed to have fallen under a curse. This was the fourth time in so many years that the mortgage had changed hands.

Each successive landlord had proven more neglectful than the previous until it was a wonder the hall still existed. Alethea supposed one could not expect finer aspirations from a seasoned gamester, although she could not remember a prior master seizing his assets in so unsettling a manner.

Her footman Kemble might be right. This nocturnal besiegement did not bode well for a slumberous village that held only one assembly a year.

Nor did it foreshadow a safe future for a young lady like Alethea who wished to withdraw from the world and to heal from the invisible wounds that another man had inflicted upon her.

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