

# A LORD FOR A WICKED LADY

HER STERN HUSBAND

BOOK FIVE



R. R. VANE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



*N*ormandy, 1189

THE CHURCH BELLS rang for vespers in the grey light of dawn. Rowena splashed cold water on her face, trying to clear her head. The dream she'd had this morn was still upon her, and she vainly tried to push it away. In her dream she'd seen her son, as he'd been when she had left him. It would be only a while, she'd told herself, until she came back to reclaim him. Set on offering her son Robin a life of nobility and riches, she had thought little of leaving him just in his father's charge, until she achieved her ends. She recalled how confident she'd been, those years ago, that she would change her fate.

Beginning to comb her fair hair in front of the copper mirror, Rowena twisted her mouth into a bitter line. Aye, change her fate she had. For ten years now she'd been Lady FitzUrse, and no one knew of her first marriage and of the young son she'd left behind. To them, she was Emma FitzUrse, not Rowena Archer. No one here knew her true name, and, as long as she remained in Normandy

and didn't set foot on English soil, there was no peril anyone would learn her secret.

After she'd righted and plaited her hair, Rowena allowed her serving woman to assist to her dressing and then critically studied her own appearance, staring at a pale, haughty face in the polished copper surface. She was two and thirty, well past her prime and, in everyone's eyes, childless. And she now passed as a widow, entitled to her due and able to retire to a convent. Rowena stifled a sigh as she put on her wimple. She supposed a convent was a fitting way to atone for the grievous sins of her past, although, in truth, it would be far less of an ordeal than her life had been as Ranulf FitzUrse's pretend wife. Self-consciously, she touched the faint bruise she still had on the left side of her cheek, one last token of her departed husband, who'd lost his life a mere five days ago in a riding accident.

A hurried message from a servant made her straighten her shoulders and head downstairs to the Hall, where the man she called uncle, Roland de Fael, was now waiting for her, with a look of impatience upon his lined face.

"Niece," he enunciated curtly as she dropped a brief curtsy.

Rowena heard the urgency in his voice, but she decided to make little of it. Roland de Fael was nothing to her now. She had her widow's portion and also the lands which had come to her from her father's side. So she depended in no way on Roland at this time. Whatever urgent designs he harboured, they no longer had anything to do with her. And she was finally free to do as she wished. Certainly, not entirely free, as she would never be able to return to England, but she could at last leave this place to serve the rest of her penance.

"Will you take some refreshments, Uncle?" she offered stiltedly, hoping Roland would refuse her formal offer, and irritated when he replied with a curt nod.

After instructing the servants on what needed to be readied, Rowena led her uncle to the solar to partake in the refreshments.

But Roland de Fael just stared distractedly at the plate of cheese and meat the serving girl soon placed in front of him. Instead, he cast Rowena a measuring glance.

“You are a handsome woman still,” he proclaimed, appraising her appearance dispassionately. “And not past childbirth,” he added, in an offhand manner which made Rowena’s blood chill.

She schooled her face to betray nothing and she simply shrugged.

“It’s of no matter now, is it? I have no further wish to marry.”

Roland de Fael narrowed his eyes, but then he shrugged in turn.

“Your wishes in the matter mean nothing, as you must already know.”

Rowena held his eyes, coming to see his gaze was unflinching. Did he have a new match in store for her? She told herself she should not worry. At this time, there was nothing Roland could do to coerce her into a new match. She now had her own wealth, and her own household to protect her. And she was finally free of the cage which had been her pretend marriage to Ranulf FitzUrse.

“I beg to differ, Uncle. There is no hold you have over me at this time. For once, I am free to do as I please,” she countered, with a regal tilt of her head.

Roland de Fael shook his head and he suddenly let out a harsh bark of laughter.

“In that you are wrong, Niece. I do still have a hold on you.”

He held her gaze in the same cold, unflinching manner as before, and for a moment Rowena’s chest squeezed in alarm because she feared that, after all these years, he had finally discovered her secret. Surely he could not have found out that ten years ago she’d traded places with her twin sister and that she was not truly Emma? He could not know of her former life in England and of the young son she’d left behind. Surely, he could not have learned of the mad, cruel things she’d done. Rowena fought valiantly not to clutch her chest, understanding only too well that the fear she now felt was not for herself. She had become long reconciled she needed to pay for the

wicked deeds of her past. Yet she felt mortally afraid of what de Fael would do to her child, understanding, as many times before, that her own reckless actions may have placed her son forever in peril.

“Surely, you do recall one Guy de Gisborne,” her uncle now tossed out, and Rowena felt sheer relief, at first, upon the mention of the name.

But the relief was short-lived. While it was plain her uncle was still unaware of her secret, by the knowing way he was now glancing upon her, it seemed he did recall a time that she would rather forget. But try as she might, Rowena could not now help distinctly remembering one man called Guy de Gisborne. One man who was dark and lean and wicked. And...

“You do recall the night you set eyes upon him?” Roland de Fael queried.

Mutely, Rowena could do nothing but nod, struggling hard to keep a deep flush from descending upon her cheeks. She did recall the night she’d met Guy de Gisborne. It was a night etched in her memory. A night she would have wanted entirely gone from her mind. But try as she might, she could not ever forget it.

“As I well remember, you were wed at the time. Yet I know you spent the night in his chamber with him, like the loose woman you are,” de Fael continued with a mocking smile.

Rowena made herself let out a careless shrug, striving hard to push that night from her memory. It was just one of the reckless, shameful things of her youth. And far less grievous than the other things she’d done. Besides... Her uncle’s self-satisfied voice broke the train of her thoughts.

“I have consulted with de Gisborne’s father. And we both find a match agreeable between two members of our family. He covets the lands you now hold from your late husband. And I— you understand why I wish for an alliance with de Gisborne.”

De Gisborne—a most wicked name for one of the most wicked families that had ever lived. A depraved father and two depraved

sons who held the favour of two kings, in both France and England. Tales of bleak exploits made most of those acquainted with the name shudder from it.

Rowena shook her head.

“What is Guy de Gisborne and his family to me now? Surely, the thing you speak of is long past. I am a widow.”

But the way her uncle glanced upon her, thwarted the last of her hopes. It seemed Mauger de Gisborne now coveted her wealth and wished to bestow it upon his wicked son Guy. And what a de Gisborne wanted; a de Gisborne usually got.

“Yet you were not a widow at the time you and de Gisborne spent the night in his chamber?” her uncle pointed out with a gleam in his eye.

“Nay, but...”

Rowena clamped her mouth shut, because she understood whatever she wished to say at this time would be wasted upon Roland. He and the de Gisbornes had the sure means to ruin her. They could accuse her at any time and have her condemned as a loose woman. And while Rowena now felt ready to accept whatever penance was due to her for the wicked things she'd done, she was only too aware that her downfall could lead to further questions being asked. No one should learn of her secret son. Because the one thing she wished for in this world was for Robin to be forever safe from the consequences of her folly.

She stared at her hands, taking in the sapphire ring she still wore and recalling that day, ten years ago, when she had slipped it on her finger and had made the decision which had changed her life, allowing her to become a noble lady. She had been too full of spite and too frenzied at the time to understand what she was doing, but she had come to see, through bitter suffering, that, by seeking to change her fate, she had also altered her son's life forever. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her spine and glanced into her uncle's eyes, not letting her gaze falter.

"When?" she asked curtly, understanding that this new match was meant to be just another part of her life-long penance.

"In a fortnight hence," her uncle answered just as curtly, not bothering to disguise the triumph which now rang in his voice.

"But I am still in mourning. I need more time," Rowena pointed out wearily, not truly expecting her protests to fall on understanding ears.

"Nay, you do not. Guy de Gisborne is impatient to have you."

The image of lean and wicked Guy de Gisborne seized Rowena's mind, and she recalled only too well he was some three or four years younger than she was. A very pleasing man to look upon in his dark slenderness. And she recalled tales about the many women who were said to be in his thrall.

She could not help but shake her head and snort in derision.

"Impatient? Whatever for? I'm old and, most likely, barren. Surely there must be some young and fruitful bride he could have settled for, who could well match the wealth I am to bring?"

Roland de Fael let out a cold laugh.

"But no pious, chaste bride will ever have him. Or do you not recall? His mother was a witch."



THERE WAS no rest for the wicked, it seemed. And Rowena was well aware she herself was wicked. So it seemed fitting she should marry a wicked man. A wicked man's son. A wicked woman's son. Guy de Gisborne must be all of these things and more.

Rowena spent a restless night, and her soul was troubled when she attended Mass by her uncle's side. She studied his complacent profile and the self-satisfied smile he bore upon his lips. Roland de Fael—the man she called uncle. One of the jailors in the prison she'd entered when she'd agreed to switch lives with her long-lost twin sister.

After Mass, she told Roland she would linger to pray, although



he had already let her know that the one he meant for her to marry, Guy de Gisborne, would be waiting outside the church to greet them.

“This is no time for prayer,” Roland de Fael growled, grabbing her arm painfully.

Rowena slapped his hand away. She was accustomed to his rough ways and looked upon them with cold disdain. Like her former so-called husband, he thought nothing of others, but only of his own greed. And Rowena recalled a time when she herself had been just like him. With no thought of others, and mad and reckless.

“I wish to pray. If my betrothed wants to confer with me, he needs to wait until I finish my prayers.”

De Fael scowled at her menacingly, but Rowena was well aware of the others in church, engaged in prayer or in whispered talk, as well as of the robed holy men who were already casting them looks of disapproval. This was a place of worship. And even Roland de Fael knew it.

“Wilful as always,” he ended up muttering with a thwarted look upon his face.

“I will marry this lord just as you command. What more do you now wish from me?” she countered, already understanding that once she got to formally bear de Gisborne’s name, she would be indeed out of her uncle’s reach. Only now she’d be within her new husband’s reach and under his family’s predatory eyes.

It seemed her uncle had been able to guess the train of her thoughts.

“Well then, I shall tell Guy you are at prayer. He won’t be pleased he’s bound to wait. But it will be his task from now on to teach you not to make him wait,” he said with a reluctant sigh and a careless wave of his hand.

After he’d left, Rowena attended to her prayers, but truth be told, her mind was not on holy endeavours. Instead, it was, as always, upon the unholy thing she’d done ten years ago.

*Switch lives? You do not know what you are asking. You think my life is bliss, since you see me dressed richly as a lady while you live like a commoner. But my life isn't bliss. I am to wed a man against my will. A man who'll strike me and who will treat me roughly. Do you wish that upon yourself? It's not a life. It is a prison.*

The words echoed in Rowena's ears. They were her twin sister's words all those years ago. Her sister Emma had been raised as a lady, while Rowena herself had led the life of a commoner. She was the secret sister Rowena had sought out, because she'd wished to change her stars. And change her stars she had. She'd wed Lord FitzUrse in Emma's stead, leaving behind her true husband and her young son. It had seemed like a grand adventure at the time. The grandest. Greatness and riches. Glory. Not only for herself, but for her son. Because Rowena had always meant to go back and use her wealth and influence to make her son grow up into a great man... But things had not turned out the way she'd wished. And the bitter years she'd spent as Lord FitzUrse's pretend wife had taught her the very thing her wise sister Emma had attempted to warn her about from the start. The life she'd chosen was indeed a prison. A prison for which she'd traded her freedom and her child.

Sighing deeply, Rowena strived to focus her thoughts upon prayer, and she fervently prayed her son would grow up strong and hale and free from harm. Strange that, in her mad frenzy, years before, she had not been able to see it was the only thing which truly mattered in this life. She'd traded the one thing she loved in this world for a cold, empty life which had brought her nothing but grief. And could there ever be forgiveness for such a grievous sin?

But Rowena's thoughts drifted away from forgiveness because she soon perceived a lord was now kneeling by her side. From the corner of her eye, she spied his dress. He wore a fashionable doublet dyed black over his tunic, and the cloak fastened upon his shoulder was russet red, rather than the more eye-catching vermilion many noblemen wore. The clothes were finely made, but not ostentatious. Their wearer favoured muted hues rather than

vibrant shades. And he wore them well, in his dark leanness. Because his comeliness needed no particular enhancement.

"Such fervour," Guy de Gisborne muttered, as he knelt by her side and made the sign of the cross.

Rowena paid him no mind, attempting to focus her fingers on the rosary and her lips on the prayer she had been whispering, but soon her thoughts and eyes wandered upon Guy de Gisborne again. To those who might chance upon them, it might indeed seem he was deep in prayer. But Rowena knew otherwise.

"What are you praying for?" he asked softly after a short while.

"For the salvation of my departed husband's soul," she whispered back before she could stop herself, then she fully regretted her blatant lie, because they were in a place of worship after all.

"If you say so," Guy murmured.

Rowena bit hard into her lip, understanding that this man's presence in this holy place had already thwarted her resolution of behaving like a good, charitable woman. The wretch was right. She was not praying for Ranulf FitzUrse's soul and never would. While she did sincerely repent her past deeds, which had caused her to lose her child, she felt it hard to find true solace in piety. It was plain her soul was still restless and wicked.

"I thought your prayers were prompted by an entirely different matter," Guy said, now bowing his head with a serene expression on his darkly handsome face.

Rowena did not give him the satisfaction of querying what he meant to say. She had an inkling he would soon see fit to tell her of it himself. And he did.

"I thought you were praying you would survive after we wed," he enlightened her, and his voice was a mere, faint whisper.

He crossed himself again before he rose, and Rowena had to struggle to maintain her former kneeling posture and bowed head. Her mind began to work frantically. Was that a threat or mere mockery? With Guy de Gisborne, she had no way of knowing. He was a man she could not fully read. She clutched her rosary, and

she stared at the altar in front of her. Guy de Gisborne had been married twice before. And neither of his former wives had lived past a year. All that was known was they had both died in childbirth. But was that the truth?

Making the sign of the cross one last time, Rowena rose to her feet and picked up the cushion she had been using to kneel upon, beckoning one of her serving women to take charge of it. She furrowed her brows pensively as she walked back down the aisle. Did Guy de Gisborne mean to kill her to have her wealth? If so, why had he seen fit to tell her of it?

Rowena heaved a deep sigh when she finally stepped out of the darkened church to glance upon the light outside. It was of no matter, was it? Her life had already become an ordeal, and death would come as a true absolution. Shaking her head to herself, Rowena resolved that perhaps Guy de Gisborne was one of those men far too fond of the cat and mouse game. Perchance he would toy with her and he would torment her, but he would not choose to offer her the true release one found in death.

She strived to erase the stricken surprise from her face when she saw he had waited upon her right in front of the church. With a guileless smile, he extended his hand courteously to her, and Rowena had no choice but to take it, since now he was her betrothed, after all. Modestly, she held her eyes downcast while they began to walk together hand in hand, because she was newly widowed and she was aware the eyes of noble folk were upon them. It was unseemly enough that her betrothal had taken place so soon after her husband's demise.

"How chaste of you, *ma mie*," Guy uttered softly with mockery in his voice. "Is this chastity for the benefit of those gathered here, or for my benefit? Because, perchance you do not recall, but I am well aware you are not chaste."

"How could I be entirely chaste? I have been married before. Just like yourself," Rowena countered, continuing to keep her eyes modestly averted from his face and hoping that a becomingly

pretty blush had descended upon her features. She would not have tongues wag over her more than they did already. Any kind of talk on her account would be perilous for those she'd once left behind.

"Not chaste then, but witty. And wit is a commendable virtue. I am a lucky man indeed," Guy said, now suddenly stopping and drawing her closer to him.

Rowena was forced to take a small step back, afraid he would be audacious enough to want to bestow a kiss upon her in front of all the people gathered here, but Guy de Gisborne made no further move to pull her to him. Instead, he let his gaze shamelessly roam upon her face and body, and Rowena fought hard to bite back the livid words which sprang upon her lips. He was being brazen, even if he was no longer touching her at this time. In sheer shocked fury, Rowena understood her nipples had become erect, and she began to wonder if the fabric of her shift and gown was thick enough to conceal it. Guy de Gisborne's gaze now searingly travelled on the swell of her breasts and Rowena felt sure that, even if he could not discern the way her traitorous body was now acting, he could already tell of the heat in her blood and of the cause of it.

When he at last returned his eyes upon her face, there was a feral glint in their green depths.

"So," he told her, as if words of fierce passion had already been exchanged between them.

Rowena belatedly understood that her own countenance had become just as feral as his, and she checked herself.

"My lord, we shall be wed in a fortnight hence, God willing," she said in a demure voice, yet loud enough for several others to hear her words, and she dropped a deep curtsy.

Guy de Gisborne inclined his dark head.

"I wonder though how willing God is. God has nothing to do with this, and you and I both know it," he said quite softly, so only she could hear him.