



The Taming

By Jude Deveraux

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England's most valiant knights paid court to wealthy Liana Neville, but only the infamous warrior Rogan Peregrine made no secret of his powerful desires. His very caress melted Liana into liquid fire, and she vowed to capture this magnificent, wild man. Boldly the delicate beauty gave him her hand -- and Britain's richest dower. Yet he was bound to a bitter feud: for love betrayed, brothers killed, and ancestral land usurped. In Rogan's war-ravaged castle, Liana would lay her tender seige...to redeem his embattled spirit and win his untamed heart!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Jude Deveraux is the author of forty-one *New York Times* bestsellers, including MOONLIGHT IN THE MORNING, SCENT OF JASMINE, SCARLET NIGHTS, DAYS OF GOLD, LAVENDER MORNING, RETURN TO SUMMERHOUSE, and SECRETS. To date, there are more than sixty million copies of her book in print worldwide. She lives in Florida. To learn more, visit www.judedeveraux.com.

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Chapter One

England

1445

"Either your daughter goes or I do," Helen Neville said sternly, hands on hips as she looked down at her husband, Gilbert. He was stretched out on a cushioned window seat, the sun streaming in through the old stone window past blue-painted wooden shutters. He was rubbing the ears of his favorite hound while eating tasty little bits of ground meat.

As usual, Gilbert didn't make any response to Helen's demand, and she clenched her fists in anger. He was twelve years older than she and lazy beyond anything she'd ever known. In spite of the fact that he spent most of his time on a horse following a soaring hawk, his belly was large and growing bigger by the day. She had married him for his money, of course, married him for his gold plate, for his thousands of hectares of land, for his eight castles (two of which he'd never seen), for his horses, his army of men, for the beautiful clothes he could give her and her two children. She had read a list of Gilbert Neville's possessions and said yes to the marriage proposal without even asking to see the man.

Now, a year after their marriage, Helen asked herself, If she had met Gilbert and seen his slothfulness, would she have wondered who ran his estates? Did he have a superior steward? She knew he had only one legitimate child, a pale, shy-looking girl who said not a word to Helen before the marriage, but perhaps Gilbert had an illegitimate son who ran his estates.

After they were married and Helen knew she had a husband who was as lazy in bed as he was out of it, she found out who ran the Neville lands.

Liana! Helen wished she'd never heard the name. That sweet-looking, shy-seeming daughter of Gilbert's was a devil in disguise. Liana, like her mother before her, ran everything. Liana sat at the steward's table while the peasants paid their yearly rents. Liana rode through the countryside and saw to fields and ordered broken roofs repaired. Liana decided when a castle had become too dirty and the crops depleted and told the retainers it was time to move. Three times in the last year Helen had first heard that they were moving when she saw a maid packing her bedding.

It had done no good to explain to Gilbert or Liana that she, Helen, was now the lady of the manor and that Liana should relinquish her power to her stepmother. Both of them had merely looked at Helen curiously, as if one of the stone heads of the gutters had begun to speak, then Liana had gone back to ruling and Gilbert had returned to doing nothing.

Helen had tried to take charge on her own, and for a while she thought she was succeeding -- until she found out that each servant was asking Liana for verification before carrying out her order.

At first, Helen's complaints to Gilbert had been mild, and usually after she had pleased him in bed.

Gilbert had paid her little mind. "Let Liana do what she likes. You can't stop her. You could no more stop Liana or her mother than you could stop the fall of a boulder. It was and is best to get out of their way." He'd turned over and gone to sleep, but Helen had lain awake all night, her body hot with rage.

By morning she was ready to be a boulder, too. She was older than Liana and, if need be, much more cunning. After her first husband had died and his younger brother had inherited the estates, Helen and her two little girls had been pushed aside by her sister-in-law. Helen had had to stand by and watch as duties that had once been hers were taken over by a younger, much less competent woman. When Gilbert Neville's proposal came, she leaped at the chance to once again have her own household, her own home. But now her place was being usurped by a small, pale girl who should have been married and sent away from her father's house years ago.

Helen had tried to talk to Liana, had tried to tell her of the pleasures of having her own husband, her own children, her own household.

Liana had blinked at her with those big blue eyes of hers, looking as meek as an angel on the chapel ceiling. "But who will take care of my father's estates?" she'd asked simply.

Helen gritted her teeth. *"I am your father's wife. I will do what needs to be done."*

Liana's eyes twinkled as she looked at Helen's sumptuous velvet dress with a train in back, at the low V neck in front and in back that exposed a great deal of her beautiful shoulders, at the heavily embroidered, padded headdress, and smiled. "The sun would burn you in that."

Helen found herself defending her words. "I would dress suitably to ride a horse. I'm sure I can ride as well as you can. Liana, it's not proper that you remain in your father's house. You are nearly twenty years old. You should have your own home, your own -- "

"Yes, Yes," Liana said. "I'm sure you're right, but I must go now. There was a fire in the village last night and I must see to the damage."

Helen had stood there, her face red, her temper black. What good did it do her to be married to one of the richest men in England, to live in one castle after another where the riches were more than she'd ever believed possible? Thick, colorful tapestries hung from every wall, every ceiling was painted with biblical scenes, every bed, table, and chair was covered with an embroidered cloth. Liana kept a roomful of women who did nothing but bend over tapestry frames and ply their needles. The food was divine, as Liana enticed cooks with excellent wages and fur-trimmed gowns for their wives. The latrines, the moat, the stables, the courtyards were always clean, as Liana liked cleanliness.

Liana, Liana, Liana, Helen thought, putting her fists to her temples. With the servants, it was always what Lady Liana wanted, what Lady Liana had ordered, or even what Gilbert's first wife had established. Helen might not have existed for all the power she had in the running of the Neville properties.

It was when Helen's two little girls had begun to quote Liana that Helen's anger came to the boiling point. Young Elizabeth had wanted a pony of her own, and Helen had smiled and said she could have it. Elizabeth had merely blinked at her mother, then said, "I'll ask Liana," and run off.

It was that incident that had caused Helen to now give her husband an ultimatum. "I am less than nothing in this house," she said to Gilbert. She didn't bother to keep her voice down, even though she was well aware of the listening servants around them. They were Liana's servants, well-trained, obedient men and women who knew their young mistress's generosity as well as her wrath and who would, upon request, have laid down their lives for her.

"Either your daughter goes or I do," Helen repeated.

Gilbert looked over the tray of meats that were molded into shapes of the twelve apostles. He chose St. Paul and popped him into his mouth. "And what am I to do with her?" he asked lazily. There wasn't much on earth that could excite Gilbert Neville. Comfort, a good hawk, a good hound, good food, and peace were all he asked in life. He had no idea what his first wife had done to increase the wealth his father had left him and the huge dowry she had brought to the marriage, nor did he know what his daughter did. To his mind, the estates ran themselves. The peasants farmed; the nobility hawked; the king made laws. And it also seemed that women quarreled.

He had seen the beautiful young widow Helen Peverill as she rode across her dead husband's land. Her dark hair had been streaming down her back, her large breasts were nearly coming out of her gown, and the wind plastered her skirts to strong, healthy thighs. Gilbert had experienced a rare moment of lust and had told her brother-in-law he'd like to marry Helen. Gilbert hadn't done much after that until Liana told him it was time for the wedding. After one lusty wedding night, Gilbert was satisfied with Helen and expected her to go off and do whatever women did all day. But she hadn't. Instead, she had begun to nag and nag -- about Liana, of all things. Liana was such a sweet, pretty child, always seeing that the musicians played songs that Gilbert liked, telling the maids to bring him food and, on long winter evenings, telling stories to entertain him. He could not understand why Helen wanted Liana to go away. Liana was so quiet, one hardly knew she was around.

"I guess Liana can have a husband if she wants one," Gilbert said, yawning. He believed in people doing what they wanted to. He thought the men worked in the fields from daylight to dark because they wanted to.

Helen tried to calm herself. "Of course Liana doesn't want a husband. Whyever should she want a man to tell her what to do when she has absolute freedom -- and absolute power -- here? If I had had such power in my dead husband's home, I would never have left." She threw up her hands in a gesture of helpless anger. "To have power and no man to cater to! Liana has heaven on earth. She will *never* leave here."

Even though Gilbert didn't understand Helen's complaints, her screeching was beginning to bother him. "I will speak to Liana and see if there is a husband she wants."

"You have to command her to take a husband," Helen said. "You have to choose a man for her and tell her she is to marry him."

Gilbert looked down at his hound and smiled in memory. "I crossed Liana's mother once and only once. I am not about to make the same error again and cross her daughter."

"If you do not get your daughter out of my house, you will regret crossing *me*," Helen said before turning on her heel and leaving the room.

Gilbert scratched his hound's ears. This new wife was as a kitten to a lion compared to his first wife. He really couldn't understand what Helen was angry about. It had never crossed his mind that a person would actually *want* responsibility. He picked up a molded St. Mark and ate it thoughtfully. Vaguely, he remembered someone warning him against having two women in the same household. Perhaps he would talk

to Liana and see what she thought of this idea of getting a husband. If Helen carried out her threat and moved to another estate, he'd miss her in his bed. But if Liana did marry, perhaps she would marry someone with good breeding hawks.

"So," Liana said softly, "my esteemed stepmother wants to throw me out of my own home, out of the home my mother worked to increase and I have managed for three years."

Gilbert thought perhaps his head was beginning to hurt. Helen had ranted at him for hours on end last night. It seems Liana had given some order for new cottages to be built in the walled town at the foot of the castle. Helen was horrified that Liana planned to use Neville money to pay for these cottages rather than let the peasants pay for them themselves. Helen had been so angry and screeched so loudly that all six of Gilbert's hawks had flown from their perches into the rafters. They had been hooded to keep them calm and the blind, panicked flight had caused one bird to break its neck. Gilbert knew that something had to be done; he couldn't bear losing more of his beloved hawks.

His first thought was to fit the two women with armor and let them joust for who remained and who left, but women had weapons harder than steel: They had words.

"I think Helen believes you'll be, well, happier in your own home. With your own husband and a few brats." Gilbert couldn't imagine being happier than on the Neville lands, but who knew about women?

Liana walked to the window and looked out across the inner courtyard, across the thick castle walls and below to the walled town. This was just one of the estates her family owned, only one of the many she managed. Her mother had spent long years training Liana how to treat the people, how to check the steward's records, and how to bring in a profit every year that would be used to buy more land.

Liana had been angry when her father said he was going to marry a pretty young widow. She didn't like the idea of another woman's trying to take her mother's place and she had a premonition of trouble, but Gilbert Neville had his own stubborn streak and sincerely believed he should be allowed to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. For the most part, Liana was pleased he wasn't one of those men who thought of nothing but war and weapons. He stayed with his hounds and his hawks and left the more important matters first to his wife, then to his daughter.

Until now. Now he'd married the vain Helen, whose foremost thought was profit so that she could buy more and richer clothes. Helen kept five women working long hours sewing on her gowns. There was one woman who did nothing but sew on seed pearls. Last month alone, Helen had purchased twenty-four pelts of fur, and the month before that she had bought a basketful of ermine pelts, thinking no more of the expense than if she'd purchased a basket of corn. Liana knew that if she turned over the running of the estates to Helen, she'd bleed the peasants dry just so she could have a belt of gold and diamonds.

"Well?" Gilbert asked from behind Liana. Women! He thought. He was going to miss the day's hunting if he didn't get an answer from his daughter. The way Helen was acting, she might climb on a horse and follow him just so she could continue to berate him.

Liana turned to her father. "Tell my stepmother I will marry if I find a *suitable* man."

Gilbert looked relieved. "That seems fair enough. I'll tell her, and she'll be happy." He started out the door, then paused and put his hand on his daughter's shoulder in a rare display of affection. Gilbert wasn't a man to look at the past, but at this moment he wished he'd never seen Helen, never married her. He hadn't realized how comfortable he'd been with his daughter to look after his simple needs and a maid now and then to care

for his baser needs. He shrugged. There was no use regretting what couldn't be changed. "We'll find you a lusty young man who'll give you a dozen brats to fret over." He left the room.

Liana sat down hard on the feather mattress of her bed and waved her maid out of the room. Liana held her hands up and saw how they were shaking. She'd once faced a crowd of peasants armed with sickles and axes alone, with three terrified maids behind her, yet she'd kept her head and turned the rabble away by giving them what food she carried with her and jobs on her land. She'd dealt with drunken soldiers; she had once escaped a rape by an overzealous suitor. She had been able to deflect one disaster after another with calmness, assurance, and peace of mind.

But the idea of marriage terrified her. Not just frightened her, but deep-down, inside-her-soul terrified her. Two years ago she had seen her cousin Margaret married off to a man chosen by the girl's father. Before the marriage the man had written love sonnets to Margaret's beauty. Margaret used to talk about how her forthcoming marriage was a love match and she so looked forward to a life with this beloved man.

After the marriage, the man showed his true self. He sold most of Margaret's immense dowry to pay his huge debts. He left Margaret in an old, decaying, cold castle with but a few retainers, then went to court, where he spent most of the rest of her dowry on jewels for his many high-born whores.

Liana knew how fortunate she was to have the power of running her father's estates. She knew that no woman had any power unless it was granted to her by a man. Men had been asking for her hand in marriage since she was four years old. She had been betrothed once, when she was eight, but the young man had died before she was ten. Her father had never bothered to accept any offers after that and so Liana had quietly been able to escape marriage. When some suitor had pressed his petition, all Liana had had to do was remind Gilbert of what chaos her marriage would cause and Gilbert refused the offer.

But now this greedy Helen was interfering. Liana considered turning all power of running the estates over to her stepmother and retiring to their estate in Wales. Yes, that would be remote enough. She could live there in privacy, and soon both Helen and her father would forget about her.

Liana stood up, her fists clenched at her side, her simple, unornamented velvet gown sweeping the tile floor. Helen would never allow her to live in peace. Helen would pursue her to the ends of the earth to make sure her stepdaughter was as miserable as all women seemed to be in marriage.

Liana picked up her hand mirror from a little table by the window and stared at her reflection. In spite of all the love poems eager young men who wanted to marry her had written, in spite of the songs the traveling singers who were paid by her had sung, she could not see that she was a beauty. She was too pale, too blonde, too... too innocent-looking to be a beauty. Helen was beautiful, with her snapping dark eyes that let everyone know she had secrets, with her sultry way of looking at men. Liana sometimes thought the reason she could control the servants so well was because she was sexless. When Helen walked across the courtyard, men stopped what they were doing and looked at her. Men tugged their forelocks in respect to Liana, but they didn't stand gaping or guffaw and punch each other when she passed.

She moved to the window and looked down into the courtyard. A pretty milkmaid was being teased by an assistant farrier, the boy's hands reaching for the girl's round, shapely body.

Liana turned away, for the sight was too painful for her to bear. Never could she hope for some young man to chase her around a well. She could never find out if some young man *wanted* to chase her. Her father's people would always treat her with the respect of her station and address her as "my lady." Her suitors would do anything to win her hand because they wanted her dowry. It wouldn't matter if she were a hunchback with three eyes; she would still receive flowery compliments and glowing praise of her beauty. Once, a man had

sent her a poem about the beauty of her feet. As if he'd ever seen them!

"My lady."

Liana looked up to see her maid, Joice, standing in the doorway. Joice was the closest thing to a friend that Liana had. Being only ten years older than Liana, Joice was almost like a sister. Liana's mother had hired Joice to care for Liana when Liana was just a baby and Joice had been little more than a child herself. Liana's mother had taught her daughter to run estates, but when Liana had had a bad dream, it was Joice who'd comforted her. It was Joice who'd stayed up with her through childhood illnesses and Joice who'd taught her about things other than estate management. Joice had explained how babies were made and what the man who'd tried to rape her had wanted.

"My lady," Joice said, always careful to show respect to her young charge. Liana could afford to be friendly, but Joice was always aware of her place, always aware that tomorrow she could be without a roof over her head or food on the table. She did not volunteer advice that might not be wanted. "There is a dispute in the kitchen and -- "

"You are fond of your husband, Joice?"

The maid hesitated before answering. The entire castle knew what Lady Helen was demanding, and the people were of the belief that if Liana left, the Neville estates would be dust in six years. "Aye, my lady, I am."

"Did you choose him or was he chosen for you?"

"Your mother chose him, but I believe she wanted to please me, so I was married to a young and healthy man and I have come to love him."

Liana's head came up. "Have you?"

"Oh yes, my lady, that often happens." Joice felt she was on safe ground here. All women were afraid before their marriage. "When one spends long winter nights together, love often follows."

Liana turned away. *If* one could spend time together, she thought. *If* your greedy husband didn't send you away. She looked back at her maid. "Am I pretty, Joice? I mean actually pretty enough so that a man might be interested in me and not in all this?" She moved her arm to indicate the silk-hung bed, the tapestry on the north wall, the silver-gilt ewer, the carved oak furniture.

"Oh yes, my lady," Joice answered glibly. "You are very pretty, beautiful actually. There is no man high or low who could resist you. Your hair -- "

Liana put up her hand for the woman to stop. "Let's see to the kitchen dispute." She could not keep the heaviness out of her voice.

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