



The Conquest

By Jude Deveraux

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Yet when the magnificent Knight Tearle Howard returned from a lengthy sojourn in France, it took him but one glance to discover that Zared was most definitely female, and beautiful. Now, as the enmity between their families raged on, Tearle would mount a bold campaign to win the ravishing spitfire's heart -- and save her from his brother's dark and deadly obsession!

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This amusing and optimistic romance champions the notion that affection, trust and a firm desire for peace can triumph in a brutal world. And while it will never warm the cockles of a feminist's heart, readers can even enjoy watching Deveraux (*The Taming*) poke fun at one of the genre's sappier devices--a man so devastatingly handsome that a woman can only faint in his arms. This sequel on the warring Peregrine and Howard clans--late medieval Hatfields and McCoys--follows Zared, a tough young woman who has been raised to dress as a boy and fight like a man. Her family has nearly been impoverished by its feud with the Howards, and Severn, her brother, decides to win himself a rich wife: the unofficial prize of an upcoming tournament is the daughter of a neighboring family. So off he goes with his sister as his squire. But one man at the games isn't fooled by Zared's disguise. Tearle Howard, who grew up in France away from the conflict, sees in her a passionate young woman who might help him end their families' bitter struggle, if only he can persuade her not to loathe him.

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About the Author

Jude Deveraux is the author of more than forty *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Moonlight in the Morning*, *The 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 books in print worldwide. To learn more, visit JudeDeveraux.com.

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"Chapter 1"

England

1447

The old castle, even from a distance looking rundown and in need of repair, stood surrounded by a clean, deep moat. Outside on the grounds many men trained, practicing with swords and lances. Some fought on foot, some on horseback.

Overseeing the training were two men, both big, both muscular, both wearing looks of intense concentration on their handsome faces. These were the two remaining Peregrine brothers, the others having long ago been killed in the three-generations-old feud with the Howards.

"Where is Zared?" the older Peregrine brother, Rogan, shouted. Sun glinted off his dark hair, showing the red he had inherited from his father.

"Inside," Severn, the younger brother, shouted back, and he met his brother's eyes. "I saw Zared go," he said, not using the feminine pronoun "she," not letting the men around him know Zared was female.

Rogan nodded and looked back at the men fighting near him. He had already lost four brothers to the sneaking treachery of the Howards, and two years before he'd almost lost his wife. He did not mean to lose his little sister to the skulking rats, and so he checked often on her whereabouts.

He glared at the men near him. "Are you women that you fight so softly? Here, I will show you." He took a pike from a knight and attacked. Within minutes the knight who'd tried to fight against him was on his knees. Disgusted, Rogan glared down at the man. He raised the pike as if to strike but instead tossed it to the ground and walked away.

How could he protect his family, protect what little land the Peregrines had left, when the men who fought for him were so weak?

He mounted his horse and started toward the castle, but Severn halted him.

"You mean to see to her?" Severn asked belligerently when they were alone. He was angry that his brother had not taken his word that their young sister was safe.

"She is disobedient," Rogan answered, scowling. Three weeks earlier Zared had decided to go swimming and had ridden out alone, unescorted, unprotected. At seventeen she had a youth's belief that she could come to no harm.

"I will see to her," Severn said, trying to relieve his older brother of at least one responsibility.

Rogan nodded, and Severn reined his horse away. Severn knew all too well how his sister felt, for he, too, had felt the weight of his family's hatred of the Howards on his shoulders. Over the years he'd watched the Howards kill his family one by one. He'd seen his older brothers killed, his father and stepmother starved to death by the Howards. He'd seen Rogan's agony when his first wife and later his beloved second wife had been held captive by the Howards.

Since the birth of Zared, the only girt born to their father, the family had bonded together to protect her. From the first they had let no one know that anything as fragile and as vulnerable as a female had been born to the Peregrines. They had spread the news that a seventh son had been born.

After Zared's mother had died, starved in a castle besieged by the Howards, Zared had been raised by her six older brothers. They raised her as they would have another brother, dressing her as a boy, giving her her first sword when she was four, laughing when she'd fallen off horses. Never had they allowed Zared the luxury of believing herself to be a weak, delicate female.

But now the brothers seemed to be paying for having raised her as a male. Zared acted as independently as any boy of seventeen. She felt that if she wanted to leave the castle grounds, she had that right. She strapped a sword to her belt, hid a dagger in her boot, and thought she could protect herself from an army of Howards.

Both Severn and Rogan had tried to reason with Zared. As much as the girl liked to think she was strong and skillful with weapons, she was, in fact, merely a puny girl. Rogan's wife, Liana, had had something to say about Zared, but then Liana seemed to have something to say about everything, Severn thought.

"How could you raise her with a sword in her hand and then one day tell her to sit in the solar with her sewing and think that she would be content to do so?" Liana had asked. "She is the hardheaded know-it-all that you have raised her to be."

Severn grimaced in memory and thought for the thousandth time that Rogan ought to take a hand to his wife. Her tongue was too sharp by far.

So now, as if he and his brother didn't have enough to worry about, they had constantly to see about Zared, to make sure she had not taken it into her head to wander about the fields alone.

As Severn's horse clattered across the drawbridge he smiled. Two days past he'd had an idea about how to get Zared away from the danger of being watched constantly by the enemy Howards, and how to win himself a rich wife at the same time. He had already told Rogan of his plan, and all that was left was telling Zared. He smiled more broadly when he thought of Zared's reaction. For all that she dressed as a boy and swaggered like one, she had a girl's way of showing her pleasure over the smallest things. And Severn knew that what he had planned would give his little sister pleasure.

Of course, first he had to tell Liana what he intended. She would, no doubt, give him some difficulty, but he knew he could handle her. "A sight better than Rogan does," he muttered, for he thought his brother much, much too soft on the woman. "Ask Liana," Rogan had said when Severn told of his plans for Zared. Ask a woman? "I shall *tell* her," he said firmly as he dismounted and started up the stairs to Liana's solar.

Zared stood to one side of the doorway, her cheek against the rough stone and silently watched Liana's women. They laughed and giggled and whispered to one another while sliding dresses of gorgeous silks and velvets over their heads. Now and then Zared could catch a whispered word as they talked about the men of the castle. Zared stood a little straighter when she heard Ralph's name mentioned. He was a young knight her brother Rogan had recently hired, and never had a man affected her as Ralph did. Just walking past him made her heart beat faster and the blood rush to her face.

"Would you like to try this gown?"

It took Zared a moment before she realized the woman was speaking to her. She was one of Liana's prettiest ladies, her hair encased in a net of gold, her body corseted and wrapped in velvet, and she was holding a gown of emerald satin toward Zared. Although the secret of Zared's femininity had been kept from her brothers' men, Liana's women knew the truth -- that Zared was a girl.

Zared almost reached for the gown, but she drew her hand away sharply. "Nay," she said, with as much disdain as she could put in her voice. "I have no need for frivolities."

The woman, instead of looking as if she'd been put in her place, gave Zared a look of pity.

Zared tried her best to look haughty and turned away. What did she care for women's finery? For women's gossiping chatter?

Zared ran down the steep stone stairs and then paused at the second level, stepping back into an alcove when she heard Liana's voice. Zared held her breath as Liana passed.

In the two years since her oldest brother had taken a wife many things had changed in the Peregrine household: The food was better, the beds cleaner, and there were women all over the place. But Liana had not changed Zared. No amount of arguing with Zared's brothers had softened them into allowing Zared to change. For her own protection Zared must remain disguised as the youngest Peregrine son.

Of course, Zared told herself, she wouldn't want the confinement of being a woman. She wouldn't want to be like Liana, always confined within the castle grounds, never allowed to ride free, to gallop across a field. Women such as Liana and her ladies had to sit and wait, wait for a man to come to them. But Zared didn't have to wait for anything. If she wanted to go riding, she did so; she didn't have to wait for some man to help

her on a horse and then accompany her.

But sometimes, just sometimes, she wished she could have a woman's wiles. She had been in sword practice with Ralph when one of Liana's ladies had walked past. Ralph had turned away to watch the woman. Zared had been so angered that she'd struck Ralph on the side of his head with the flat of her sword. He'd fallen to the ground, and the men around them had laughed. After that Ralph wouldn't practice with her. Nor would he sit with her, nor, if he could help it, would he remain in the same room with her. Severn said Ralph might think Zared was a boy, but she bothered him just the same.

After a week of Ralph's hostility Zared had considered asking Liana for a gown, but she couldn't bring herself to ask. If she wore a dress, she might get Ralph's notice, but her brothers would be mightily displeased. If she wore a gown she knew her brothers would no longer allow her outside the castle walls. Was gaining Ralph's favor worth the loss of her freedom?

She was thinking so hard that at first she did not realize that the voices in the next room had grown much louder.

"You cannot think to do this," Liana was saying in a voice filled with exasperation.

Zared knew her sister-in-law had to be talking to Severn, for the two of them were always butting heads. Liana had a way of getting anything she wanted from Rogan, which was one of the things that enraged Severn. Whenever Severn spoke to Liana there was an undercurrent of hostility in his voice.

"She is my sister, and I will take her," Severn said with anger. "I do not need your permission."

Zared's ears perked up as she listened.

Liana's voice grew calmer, as if she were reasoning with the village idiot. "You are barely able to keep her safe here, yet you mean to expose her for all the world to see?"

"She will be my squire. *I* will protect her."

"While you court the Lady Anne? Will Zared sleep with the other squires? Or in your tent with you while you take your whores to bed? Zared is no Iolanthe to stand by and watch while you bed other women."

Zared sucked in her breath. Liana had gone too far. Lolanthe was the beautiful woman who had lived in the rooms above the kitchen. She had been married, but her old, senile husband had let her live with Severn -- or maybe he hadn't known where his wife was. When the old man died Severn had asked Lolanthe to marry him, but she'd refused. She said she loved Severn, would always love him, but he was too poor for her to marry. She'd returned to her husband's house and within a year was married to a fat, stupid, but very rich man. She'd asked to see Severn again, but he'd refused to see her. Now Lolanthe's name was never mentioned.

Zared couldn't see Severn, but she knew he was no doubt trembling with rage.

"Severn," Liana whispered pleadingly. "Please listen to me."

"Nay, I do not listen to you. I must go to get a wife. I do not want a wife, for I have seen how a wife can change a man, but the coffers must be filled if we are to win the war against the Howards, if we -- "

"Cease!" Liana shouted. "I can bear no more. It is always the Howards. I have heard of little else since I married into this family. I eat with the Howards, sleep with them. They never leave me. How can you risk your sister's life in your hatred of them?"

Zared held her breath. Severn wouldn't strike his brother's wife, would he? If he did, Rogan would kill him.

Yet how could Liana speak so lightly of their enemies? How could she dismiss what the Howards had done to them over three generations?

Zared released her breath when Severn spoke again. At least he could control himself enough to refrain from tricking Liana. Zared knew what her brother was talking about. A month before a herald had come issuing an invitation to a huge tournament to be held in honor of the marriage of Lady Catherine Marshall. There were rich prizes to be won, including a large emerald, but the herald had hinted that the richest prize was the younger daughter, Lady Anne. She was eighteen, just returned from years spent at the French court, and her father was seeking a good English husband for her.

At supper, after the herald had left, Severn had announced his intention of going to the tournament and returning with the rich Lady Anne as his wife. That had started a loud argument between Liana and Severn. Liana had said he thought a great deal of himself if he believed he could win a lady of manners and education merely because he could unhorse a few brawny, battle-scarred men. Severn had said Rogan had gotten himself a rich wife, and he planned to do so, too. Liana pointed out that *she* had chosen Rogan, not the other way around, and she doubted very much if Anne would choose an unshaved, dirty, full-of-himself knight like Severn who also happened to be in love with another woman. Severn dived across the table, going for Liana bodily, and Rogan had had to leap on his brother to prevent him from harming Liana.

There hadn't been much peace in the Peregrine household after that, and Zared thought the continuing battle was Liana's fault. Ever the organizer, Liana had started to prepare Severn for the tournament. She ordered new garments, embroidered hangings for his horses, planned Severn's tent, planned even the decorations for his helmet. But the more Liana planned, the more Severn dug in his heels and refused to comply with her wishes. After three weeks of arguing, he told Liana that if he had to, he'd sling the Lady Anne over his horse and force her to marry him.

"You'll have to do that," Liana said. "Force is the only way you'll get her to marry you after she gets near enough to smell you."

So Severn was planning to leave in two days for the tournament, and he was refusing to take the finery Liana had had made for him. "She will take me as I am."

"She will not have you at all," Liana had snapped.

But now he was telling Liana that he planned to take Zared as his squire. Zared smiled in anticipation: to see the world, to hear the music, taste the food, to...

"She can *not* go," Liana was saying. "Do you forget that for all her disguise she is a female? What if her sex were discovered? What is to keep some drunken man from her body? She will not be much of a marriage prize without her virginity."

Marriage? Zared thought. No one had mentioned marriage to her.

Liana's voice lowered. "What of the Howards? They will know that two of the Peregrines attend the tourney. Will they not try to take one of you? And will it not be the younger, smaller one?"

"Even the Howards would not offend the king, and he will be there."

"On the journey there and back, then," Liana said angrily. "Severn, please listen to me. Do not endanger the child's life. Do not let your anger at Iolanthe cause the death of your sister."

Zared realized that her hands were made into fists, her short nails cutting into her palms. She wanted to show herself to Liana and shout that she could take care of herself, that if any man tried to touch her, she'd use a knife on him. How could Liana think she was so weak that she must be protected like the puniest female? She was a man, not a woman!

"I mean..." Zared whispered, and to her horror she felt tears coming to her eyes. She was *female*, but she could take care of herself.

"She will go with me," Severn said, and his tone made Zared know that he meant to discuss the subject no further.

Zared pushed away from the wall and ran down the stairs before Severn saw her. Damn them all, she thought. One minute she was on the training field with Rogan yelling at her to hold her sword higher, and the next she was hearing Liana say she was too weak to fend off some drunk's advances. Was she a knight or a puny female? Was she a man or a woman?

She kept running down the stairs until she reached the courtyard below, and there stood Severn's stallion saddled and waiting for him. Cursing her whole family for confusing her, she jumped on his horse and thundered across the drawbridge, ignoring the shouts behind her.

She rode as hard and as fast as she could, not caring where she was going. The castle and the Peregrine lands disappeared behind her, and she spurred the horse harder and faster. She was some miles from home when the three men fell in behind her. A quick look back showed that they wore the Howard chevron and the Howard colors.

Her heart leaped to her throat. Rogan had warned her that the Howards watched them, that the Howards sat in wait for one of the Peregrines to go unprotected.

All her life she had been warned about the Howards. From the time she had been born the treachery of the Howards had been drilled into her. Generations earlier a Peregrine duke, old and half senile, had taken for his second wife a young, pretty woman from the Howard family. The woman was ambitious, and she had persuaded her old husband to change his will to leave all -- the money, the title, the estates -- to her weakling of a son, a son that many whispered was not the duke's get.

The only way the Howard woman could persuade the old man to disinherit his grown sons was to make him believe he and his first wife had not in truth been married. The old man, his mind clear one day and foggy the next, had requested that the parish registers that recorded the marriage be brought to him, as well as the witnesses. But no registers were to be found, and all the witnesses had died -- some of them all too recently.

The old man, dying and in great pain, had declared the sons of his first marriage bastards and had given everything to his wife's waiting family.

Since that time the Peregrines and the Howards had fought for the wealthy lands that the Howards controlled. Over the years the losses on both sides had been heavy, and the hatred was very deep.

Zared looked back at the Howard men chasing her, then rode harder than she ever had in her life, her head down to the horse's neck, the mane whipping at her eyes. The horse's hooves pounded on the hard, rutted dirt track, past people and carts and animals. But it wasn't long before she could feel the tired horse losing ground and feel the Howard men gaining on her.

"Come on, boy," she said to the horse. "If we make it to the king's forest, we'll lose them there."

She spurred the horse on, her heart beating hard with the horse's.

They almost made it, but moments before they reached the forest, when Zared could see the concealing safety of the trees ahead, the horse stepped in a hole and went down. Zared hit the ground and went rolling head over heels across the dusty road. When she stopped rolling and looked up three men were standing over her, swords pointed at her throat.

"It's the youngest Peregrine," one man said, as if he didn't believe his luck. "We'll be paid well for this."

"Stop counting your money and tie him up. I don't want him escaping before we can get him back."

One man grabbed her arm and pulled her up. "Little thing, he is," he said, feeling Zared's arm.

She jerked out of his grasp.

"Don't fool with me, boy, or I'll give you a taste of my knife. I don't guess Howard will mind whether a Peregrine is delivered to him dead or alive."

"Quiet!" the first man said. "Put the boy on your horse, and let's leave before his brothers come."

The mention of the elder Peregrines sobered the men, and one threw Zared up into a saddle and mounted behind her.

All Zared could think of was that now the feud would start afresh, and before it ended she would lose more of her brothers. She closed her eyes against tears of regret. As long as possible she must make them continue believing her to be a boy. She didn't like to think what could happen were men like these to discover she was a female.

Tearle Howard stretched his long, muscular legs, gave a great yawn, and leaned back on the sweet grass by the side of the little stream. The sun was warm on his body, and the flies droned lazily. To his left he could hear the low murmur of his brother's three men.

Tearle meant to fall asleep, meant to idle the day away dozing in the sun, but the men's voices kept him from sleeping, for the voices reminded him of his brother's obsession.

Until two months ago Tearle had lived in France, had spent time at the court of Philip the Good. Under his mother's direction Tearle had lived a life of education and refinement. He'd learned the finer aspects of music, dance, the arts. His life had been one of ease and plenty, spent in a place where conversation was an art.

But six months earlier his mother had died, and with her death Tearle's main reason for living in France disappeared. At twenty-six years of age he'd found himself curious about the family he'd never known and rarely seen, so when Oliver demanded his young brother's return Tearle had been pleased and intrigued. Tearle had made the journey back to England in the pleasant company of friends and had greeted his brother and sister-in-law warmly.

The warmth had soon cooled when Tearle found that Oliver wanted him to wage war on a family named Peregrine. Oliver had been horrified to find that Tearle had not been taught from an early age to hate the Peregrines. According to Oliver, the Peregrines were devils on earth and should be eradicated at all costs. Tearle was just as horrified to discover that the elder Howard brothers had been sacrificed to this long-running feud.

"Isn't it time to cease all this?" Tearle had asked Oliver. "Isn't the cause of the feud that the Peregrines believe our estates to be theirs? If we own the estates and they do not, would it not make more sense for the Peregrines to attack us instead of our attacking them?"

Tearle's words had so enraged Oliver that his eyes had glazed over and spittle had formed at the corner of his mouth. It was at precisely that moment that Tearle began to doubt his brother's sanity. Tearle could never get a full answer regarding the true cause of Oliver's hatred of the Peregrines, but after piecing together bits of castle gossip he suspected Oliver's hatred had something to do with his tired-looking wife, Jeanne.

Whatever the cause, the hatred was far too ingrained in Oliver for Tearle to be able to dislodge it. So while Tearle did his best to stay out of his brother's way, life with Oliver was dull at best. As far as Tearle could see, all of his brother's energies went into his hatred of the Peregrines, and nothing was left over for the finer things in life like music or pleasant society.

So there he was, idling the day away, sent out on a fool's errand by his obsessed brother.

"Go and watch them," Oliver had said, as if when Tearle saw the Peregrines he'd see not men but devils with red scales for skin. "Go with my men and see them."

"You post men outside the Peregrine castle?" Tearle had asked. "You watch them on a daily basis? Do you count the cabbages they buy?"

"Do not sneer at what you do not know," Oliver had said, his eyes narrowing. "Two years ago the oldest one went with his wife alone into the village. Had I but known, I could have taken him. I did take that wife of his, but she..." He stopped and turned away.

"She what?" Tearle asked with interest.

"Do not remind me of that day. Go and see what I fight. If you see them, you will understand."

Tearle was beginning to become curious about the Peregrines, so he went off with one of the four groups that Oliver planted about the Peregrine castle.

Tearle had not been impressed by the sight of the crumbling old castle. Some effort had been made to patch the worst of it, but nothing could disguise the poverty of the place. Tearle sat on a hill some distance away and watched through a spyglass as the three remaining Peregrines trained daily with their men. The youngest was a mere boy.

For three days Tearle sat there and watched the Peregrines training. By the end of the third day he felt he knew them all. In addition to the two men and the boy there were two illegitimate brothers who were awkward with their training, as if the weapons were new to them.

"Their father's by-blows," Oliver had said in contempt. "Had I known -- "

"You would have killed them," Tearle said tiredly.

"Beware you do not try my patience too far," Oliver warned.

The Peregrines in their poverty took in illegitimate brothers, but Oliver, with all his riches, constantly threatened to toss Tearle out. Wisely, Tearle did not make that observation to his brother.

By the fifth day Tearle had no more interest in watching the Peregrines. He was itchy for exercise and wished he could join the training. "I could take the blond one," he said to himself as he watched Severn down yet another man. He gave the spyglass to one of the men and walked away. He had to figure out a way to get away from his duty as spy.

He wasn't aware that he was drifting into sleep until the thundering hooves of horses woke him. Oliver's men were gone. Tearle was on his feet instantly. He grabbed the spyglass from the ground where it'd been tossed and looked. The Peregrine men were in confusion, the oldest, Rogan, shouting as he mounted his horse. The slightly younger brother was already galloping away. But no one seemed to know exactly which way to go, so they split off in four directions.

"The boy," Tearle said. Once before he'd seen the boy ride away from his protective brothers, but Tearle had not told Oliver's men. Let the boy meet his village sweetheart, he'd thought, and then he worked on keeping the men's attention until the boy was safely returned.

Tearle ran to his horse and rode after Oliver's men. Obviously they had seen the direction in which the boy traveled. It took Tearle a while to find the men, and at first he thought he was too late. A stallion he knew to be Severn's led behind them, the men were already heading toward the Howard lands.

Tearle's heart sank. The capture of the boy would mean open warfare -- and the Howards would be at fault. Damn Oliver and his obsession, he thought.

The men reluctantly halted when they saw Tearle. Their ugly faces were shining with triumph in having captured one thin, weak boy, and they looked at Tearle in expectation of praise.

Before one of them, sitting rigidly in the saddle, was the boy. Tearle could hardly bear to look at him.

When at last Tearle could meet the boy's eyes his mouth dropped open in shock. For he didn't look into the proud face of a boy, but into the fiery eyes of a girl.

In astonishment he looked back at the men.

"We caught him, my lord," one man said. "Do we take the boy to your brother, or do we kill him here?"

Tearle could only gape at the men. Couldn't they see that they held a girl? Couldn't they tell the difference between girls and boys?

"My lord?" one of the men asked, his voice anxious. "The Peregrines will be here soon."

Tearle regained his composure. He didn't think those Peregrine brothers would stop to talk when they saw their little sister held captive.

"I will take the... child to my brother," Tearle said. And get the girl out of the hands of these louts, he thought.

The men hesitated.

Frowning, Tearle tossed them a bag of coins. "Here, take this. I will deal with this Peregrine myself."

The men's eyes laughed. They had what they wanted, and they couldn't care less what Tearle did with the boy, or what happened to Tearle, for that matter.

One of the men rode beside Tearle and half shoved, half dumped Zared into his saddle. Tearle winced when he saw how tightly the girl's hands were tied. "Go!" he commanded the men. "Before they find you.

They hesitated not a second longer before they spurred their horses toward the Peregrine lands. Tearle fastened his arm around the girl's slim waist, hugged her body close to his, and rode hard and fast into the king's forest.

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