



Velvet Angel

By Jude Deveraux

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Elizabeth would never surrender. He was a hated Montgomery -- she was a Chatworth -- and the blood war between their families raged on, a wildfire of rape, murder, and betrayal.

Elizabeth vowed to fight the handsome lord, to resist the burning desire in his eyes -- no matter how great the temptation.

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Velvet Angel By Jude Deveraux Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #770635 in Books
- Brand: Pocket Books
- Published on: 1991-01-01
- Released on: 1991-01-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x .60" w x 4.19" l,
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

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 One"

THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND

August 1502

Elizabeth Chatworth stood on the very edge of the steep cliff, gazing toward the sea of tall barley grasses. Below her, seemingly tiny men walked with scythes on their shoulders, a few rode horses and one drove a team of oxen.

But Elizabeth didn't really see the men because her chin was held too high and it was locked into place so rigidly that nothing was going to bring it down. A warm gust of wind tried to force her away from the edge but she braced her legs and refused to move. If what had already happened to her today and now what she faced did not sway her, no mere wind was going to break her stance.

Her green eyes were dry but her throat was swollen shut with a lump of anger and unshed tears. A muscle in her jaw flexed and unflexed as she breathed deeply, trying to control her pounding heart.

Another gust of wind blew her tangled mass of honey blonde hair away from her back and, unbeknownst to Elizabeth, one last pearl disentangled itself and slid down the torn, dirty red silk of her dress. The finery she'd worn to her friend's wedding was now shredded beyond repair, her hair loose and flowing, her cheek smudged-and her hands were crudely tied behind her back.

Elizabeth lifted her eyes toward heaven, unblinking at the bright daylight. All her life, she'd had her looks referred to as angelic and never had she looked so delicate, so serene, so much like a celestial being as she did now with her heavy hair swirling about her like some silken cloak, her ragged gown giving her the look of a Christian martyr.

But the farthest thoughts from Elizabeth's mind were ones of sweetness -- or of forgiving.

"I will fight to the death," she murmured skyward, her eyes darkening to the color of an emerald on a moonlit night. "No man will best me. No man will make me submit to his will."

"Pleadin' with the Lord, are you?" came the voice of her captor from beside her.

Slowly, as if she had all the time in the world, Elizabeth turned to the man, and the coldness in her eyes made him take a step backward. He was a braggart like the hideous man he served, Pagnell of Waldenham, but this underling was a coward when his master wasn't present.

John gave a nervous cough, then boldly stepped forward and grabbed Elizabeth's upper arm. "You may think you're the great lady but for now I'm your master."

She looked him squarely in the eyes, showing none of the pain he was causing her -- after all she'd had more than enough physical and mental pain in her life. "You will never be anyone's master," she said calmly.

For a moment John's hand released its pressure on her arm, but the next second he pulled her forward and pushed her roughly.

Elizabeth nearly lost balance, but by a supreme concentration she managed to stay upright and began to walk forward.

"Every man is any woman's master," John was saying from behind her. "Women like you just haven't realized it yet. All it'll take is one good man slamming away on top of you and you'll learn who's your master. And from what I hear this Miles Montgomery is the man to give you what you need."

At the name of Montgomery Elizabeth tripped, falling to her knees.

John's laugh was disproportionately loud as he acted as if he'd succeeded in some great feat. He stood by, watching insolently as Elizabeth struggled to stand, her feet tangled in her skirt, her bound hands making her awkward.

"Excited about Montgomery, are you?" he taunted as he jerked her to her feet. For a moment he touched her cheek, the soft ivory skin, running a dirty fingertip over her delicate lips. "How can a woman as lovely as you be such a termagant? You and I could be nice to each other and Lord Pagnell would never know. What would it matter who's first? Montgomery will take your virginity anyway, so what difference does a day or so make?"

Elizabeth gathered the saliva in her mouth and spit it all into his face. It cost her a great deal of pain in her sore body as his hand came out to strike her face, but she ducked expertly and began to run. Her tied hands made speed impossible and John caught her easily, grabbing what was left of her skirt and causing her to fall, face down, on the ground.

"You vicious little slut!" he gasped, turning her over, straddling her. "You'll pay for that. I've tried to be fair with you but you deserve to be beaten."

Elizabeth's hands and arms were pinned under her and in spite of all she could do, the pain was causing tears to gather in her eyes. "But you won't beat me, will you?" she said confidently. "Pagnell would find out what you'd done and he would beat you. Men like you never risk harm to their own precious selves."

John put his hands on her breasts and his lips on hers, grinding his mouth against hers, but Elizabeth showed no emotion whatsoever. In disgust, he moved away from her and angrily walked back toward the horses.

Elizabeth sat up and tried to regain her calm. She was quite good at not showing her inner emotions and now she wanted to save all her strength for the ordeal to come.

Montgomery! The name rang in her head. Of all her fears, of all her terrors in life, the name Montgomery seemed to be the cause of them all. A Montgomery had caused her sister-in-law to lose her beauty and most of her sanity. A Montgomery had caused her older brother's disgrace and her brother Brian's disappearance.

And indirectly, a Montgomery had caused her own capture.

Elizabeth had been an attendant at a friend's wedding and by accident she'd overheard an odious man she'd known all her life, Pagnell, planning to turn a pretty little singer over to his corrupt relatives to be tried as a witch. When Elizabeth tried to rescue the girl, Pagnell had caught them and, as a joke, had decided to have Elizabeth delivered to her enemy, a Montgomery. Perhaps things wouldn't have been so bad if the singer, in a generous but not wholly intelligent gesture, had not given the information that she was somehow connected with a Montgomery.

Pagnell had bound and gagged Elizabeth, rolled her in a filthy piece of canvas and ordered his man, John, to deliver her to the notoriously lecherous, satyric, hot-blooded Miles Montgomery. Of all the four Montgomery men, Elizabeth knew that the youngest, a boy of only twenty years, just two years older than Elizabeth, was the worst. Even in the convent where she'd spent the last several years, she'd heard stories of Miles Montgomery.

She'd been told that he'd sold his soul to the devil when he was sixteen and as a result he had an unholy power over women. Elizabeth had laughed at the story but she'd not told the reason for her laughter. She thought it much more likely that Miles Montgomery was like her dead brother Edmund and had ordered women to his bed. It was a pity that this Montgomery's seed seemed to be so fertile, for it was rumored that he had a hundred bastards.

ard

Three years ago a young girl, Bridget, had left the convent where Elizabeth often lived to go and work at the ancient Montgomery fortress. She was a pretty girl with big dark eyes and swaying hips. To Elizabeth's disgust, the other residents alternately acted as if the girl were going to her wedding or to be a human sacrifice. The day before Bridget left, the prioress spent two hours with her and at vespers the girl's eyes were red from crying.

Eleven months later, a traveling musician brought them the news that Bridget had been delivered of a large, healthy boy who she named James Montgomery. It was freely admitted that Miles was the father.

Elizabeth joined in the many prayers offered for the girl's sins. Privately she cursed all men like her brother Edmund and Miles Montgomery -- evil men who believed women had no souls, who thought nothing of beating and raping women, of forcing them to do all manner of hideous acts.

She had no time for more thoughts as John grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her to her feet.

"Your time for prayers is over," he said into her face. "Montgomery has made camp and it's time he got a look at his next." -- he smiled -- "mother of his next bastard."

He laughed aloud when Elizabeth struggled against him, and when she realized he enjoyed her struggles, she stopped and gave him her coldest look.

"Witch!" he flung at her. "We'll see if this devil Montgomery can capture the angel you look like -- or will he find your heart as black as his own?"

Smiling, his hand twisted in her hair, he brought a sharp little dagger to rest against her throat. When she didn't flinch at the feel of the cold steel against her skin, his smile changed to a smirk.

"Sometimes the Montgomery men make the mistake of talking to women instead of using them as God meant them to be used. I plan to see that this Montgomery has no such ideas."

Slowly, he trailed the tip of the blade down her throat to the high square neck of what was left of her gown.

Her breath held, her eyes on his, her anger held under rigid control, she stood very still. She would not goad him to use the knife on her.

John did not cut her skin, but the blade easily parted the front of her dress and her tight corset under it. When he'd exposed the full curve of her breasts, he looked back into her face. "You've been hiding a great deal, Elizabeth," he whispered.

She stiffened and looked away from his face. It was true that she dressed conservatively, flattening her breasts, thickening her waist. Her face attracted more men than she wanted, but aside from covering her hair she could do nothing about her face.

John was no longer interested in her face as he concentrated on slicing away the rest of her gown. He'd seen very few women nude and never one of Elizabeth Chatworth's station -- or her beauty.

Elizabeth's spine was so stiff it could have been made of steel and when her clothes fell away and her bare skin felt the warm August sun, she knew that this was more painful than what had heretofore been done to her.

An ugly expletive from John, uttered from deep within him, made her blink.

"Damn Pagnell!" he cursed and reached for her.

Elizabeth stepped backward and tried to muster her dignity as she glared at John, saw he was practically foaming at the mouth. "You touch me and you're a dead man," she said loudly. "If you kill me, Pagnell will have your head -- and if you do not, I will see that he finds out what you have done. And have you forgotten my brother's rage? Is your life worth one coupling with *any* woman?"

It took a moment for John to sober and bring his eyes to her face. "I hope Montgomery causes you endless misery," he said with great feeling and stalked away to the carpet slung across his horse's rump. Without a glance at her, he unrolled it on the ground.

"Lie down," he commanded, his eyes on the carpet. "And let me warn you, woman, that if you disobey me I will forget Pagnell and Montgomery and your brother's wrath."

Obediently, Elizabeth lay down on the carpet, the short woolen nap pricking her skin, and when John knelt over her, she held her breath.

Roughly, he pushed her to her stomach, cut the bindings on her wrists, and before Elizabeth could even blink, he tossed the edge of the carpet over her and began rolling her in it. There were no more thoughts. Her only concern was a primitive instinct to continue breathing.

It seemed an eternity that she lay still, her head tilted back as she sought the air coming from the top of the carpet roll. When she was at last moved, lifted, she had to struggle to find air, and when she was tossed across the back of the horse, she thought her lungs would collapse.

John's muffled words came through the layers of carpet. "The next man you see will be Miles Montgomery. Think on that while we ride. He won't be as kind to you as I have been."

In a way, the words were good for Elizabeth because the idea of Miles Montgomery, of his evil ways, gave her some incentive to work hard at breathing. And when the horse jolted her, she cursed the Montgomery family, their house, their retainers and she prayed for the innocent Montgomery children who were part of this immoral clan.

The tent of Miles Montgomery was a splendid affair: deep green sendal trimmed in gold, the gold Montgomery leopards painted along the scalloped roof border, pennants flying from the crown. Inside, the walls were lined with pale green silk. There were several collapsible stools, cushioned with blue and gold brocade, a large table carved with the Montgomery leopards and, against opposite walls, two cots, one abnormally long, both draped with pelts of long-haired red fox.

Four men stood around the table, two dressed in the rich uniform of the Montgomery knights. The attention of the other two men was given to one of the retainers.

"He says he has a gift for you, my lord," the knight was saying to the quiet man before him. "It could be a trick. What could Lord Pagnell have that you would want?"

Miles Montgomery raised one dark eyebrow and it was enough to make his man back down. Sometimes men newly in his service thought that since their master was so young, they could take liberties.

"Could there be a man rolled in the carpet?" asked the man beside Miles.

The subdued retainer craned his neck to look up at Sir Guy. "A very small one, perhaps."

Sir Guy looked down at Miles and there passed a silent communication between them. "Send him and his gift in," Sir Guy said. "We will meet them with drawn swords."

The knight left and within seconds he returned, his sword pointed at the small of the back of the man carrying the carpet. Insolently, smirking, John half tossed his bundle to the carpeted ground and with his foot pushed it very hard, sending it, unrolling, toward Miles Montgomery's feet.

When at last the carpet stopped, there were four stunned faces as they gaped at what lay before them: a nude woman, her eyes closed, long thick lashes soft on delicately colored cheeks, great massive torrents of honey blonde hair wrapped and twisted about her, curls tickling her waist and the tops of her thighs. She was outrageously curved with large firm breasts, a tiny waist, long, long legs. And her face was something men expected to see only in heaven -- delicate, ethereal, not quite of this world.

Smiling triumphantly, John slipped out of the tent unnoticed.

Elizabeth, half dazed from the lack of air, opened her eyes slowly and looked up to see four men standing over her, their swords drawn but aimed toward the ground. Two of the men were obviously retainers and she dismissed them. The third man was a giant, several inches over six feet, steel gray hair, a scar running diagonally across his entire face. Although the man was indeed frightening, she somehow sensed he was not the leader of this group.

Beside the giant was another man dressed resplendently in deep blue satin. Elizabeth was accustomed to

seeing strong, handsome men, but something about this one with his leashed power held in check so easily made her stare. The other men's eyes were fastened on Elizabeth's body, but this man turned and she looked for the first time into the face of Miles Montgomery, and their eyes locked.

He was a handsome man, very very handsome, with dark gray eyes under heavy, arched brows, a thin nose with slightly flaring nostrils and a full sensual mouth.

Danger! was Elizabeth's first thought. This man was dangerous to women as well as men.

She broke eye contact with him and in seconds she stood, grabbing a pelt from one of the cots near her and a war ax from the top of the table. "I will kill the first man who comes near me," she said, holding the ax with one hand while she tossed the pelt over one shoulder, leaving the other bare, one leg exposed from waist to bare foot.

The giant took a step toward her and she raised the ax, both hands on the handle.

"I know how to use this," she warned, looking up at the man with absolutely no fear.

The two knights took a step closer toward her and Elizabeth backed away, looking from one to the other. The back of her knees hit the edge of the cot and she could go no farther. One of the knights smiled at her and she snarled at him in return.

"Leave us."

The words were quiet, uttered in a low voice, but it held command and all of them looked at Montgomery.

The giant of a man gave Elizabeth one last look, then nodded at the two knights and the three of them left the tent.

Elizabeth tightened her grip on the ax, her knuckles already white, as she glared across the space toward Miles Montgomery. "I will kill you," she said through her teeth. "Do not think that because I'm a woman I won't enjoy hacking a man to pieces. I would love to see the blood of a Montgomery spilled upon the earth. "

Miles didn't move from his place by the table, but kept watching. After a moment he lifted his sword and Elizabeth drew in her breath, preparing for the battle to come. Very slowly, he placed his sword on the table and turned away from her, presenting his profile. Again slowly, he removed the jeweled dagger he wore at his side and placed it on the table beside the sword.

He turned back to her, his face expressionless, his eyes giving nothing away, and took a step toward her.

Elizabeth lifted the heavy ax and held it in readiness. She would fight to the death, for death was preferable to the beating and rape she knew this devil-man planned.

Miles sat down on a stool, several feet in front of her; he did not speak, but only watched her.

So! he did not think a woman a worthy opponent, but disarmed himself and sat down while she held a weapon of death over his head. With one lunge, she leaped forward and swung the ax at his neck.

Effortlessly, he caught the handle in his right hand, easily held it and looked into her eyes as she stood close

to him. For a moment she was paralyzed, hypnotized by his eyes. He seemed to be searching her face for something, as if he asked silent questions of her.

She jerked the ax away from his grip and nearly fell when she found he released it freely. She caught herself at the edge of the table. "Damn you!" she said under her breath. "May the Lord and all His angels curse the day a Montgomery was born. May you and all your descendants writhe in the fires of hell forever."

Her voice had risen almost to a shout and outside she could hear movement.

Miles still sat there, watching her silently, and Elizabeth could feel her blood beginning to boil. When she saw her hands starting to shake, she knew she must calm herself. Where was the cool detachment she'd cultivated over the years?

If this man could remain calm, so could she. She listened and if her guess were correct, the sounds she heard outside were the men moving away. Perhaps if she could get past this one man, she could escape and get home to her brother.

With her eyes on Miles, she began to walk backward, circling him as she made her way toward the tent flap. Slowly, he turned on the stool and watched her. Outside she heard the whinny of a horse and she prayed that if she could just make it outside she'd be free.

Even though her eyes never left Miles's, she still never saw him move. One moment he was sitting, relaxed, on the stool and the next, just as her hand touched the tent flap, he was beside her, his hand around her wrist. She brought the ax straight down toward his shoulder but he caught her other wrist and held her.

She stood still, imprisoned lightly, painlessly, by his grip, and glared up at him. He was so close she could feel his breath on her forehead. As he looked down at her, he seemed to be waiting for something and then he looked puzzled.

With eyes as hard as the emeralds they resembled, she glared up at him. "And now what comes next?" she asked, hatred in her voice. "Do you beat me first or rape me? Or perhaps you like them both at the same time. I am a virgin and I've heard it hurts most the first time. No doubt my added pain will give you much pleasure."

For just a second, his eyes widened as if in astonishment and it was the first unguarded expression Elizabeth had seen on his face. His gray eyes locked into hers so hard that she looked away.

"I can endure what you deal out," she said quietly" and if your wish is to see me beg, you will fail."

His hand released her wrist holding the tent flap and he cupped the left side of her cheek, gently turning her back to look at him.

She stiffened at his touch, hating his hands on her.

"Who are you?" he half whispered.

She straightened her spine even more and hatred flamed in her eyes. "I am your enemy. I am Elizabeth Chatworth."

Something passed quickly across his face and then was gone. After a long moment, he removed his hand from her cheek and, after a backward step, he released her other wrist. "You may keep the ax if it makes you feel safer but I cannot let you leave."

As if dismissing her, he turned his back and walked toward the center of the tent.

Immediately, Elizabeth was through the tent flap and out of the tent and, just as quickly, Miles was beside her, his hand once again encircling her wrist.

"I cannot let you leave," he repeated, this time more firmly. His eyes traveled downward to her bare legs and up again. "You aren't dressed for running away. Come inside and I'll send my man to purchase clothes."

She jerked away from him. The sun was setting and in the twilight he looked even darker. "I want no clothes from you. I want nothing from any Montgomery. My brother will -- "

She broke off at his look.

"Do not mention the name of your brother to me. He killed my sister."

Miles recaptured her wrist and gave a light tug. "Now I must insist that you come inside. My men will be returning soon and I don't think they should see you dressed like this."

She held her ground. "What does it matter? Isn't it the custom of men like you to throw female captives to their knights when they've finished with them?"

She wasn't sure but she thought she saw just a flicker of a smile on Miles's lips. "Elizabeth," he began, then paused. "Come inside and we'll talk there." He turned toward the dark trees near them. "Guy!" he bellowed, making Elizabeth jump.

Immediately, the giant stepped into the clearing. After only a cursory glance at Elizabeth, he looked at Miles.

"Send someone into the village and find some suitable women's clothes. Spend what you need." The voice Miles used to his man was quite different from the one he used with her.

"Send me with him," Elizabeth said quickly. "I will talk to my brother and he will be so grateful that you've released me unharmed that it will end this feud between the Chatworths and Montgomerys."

Miles turned back to her and his eyes were hard. "Don't beg, Elizabeth."

Without thought but with a cry of rage, she lifted the ax again and aimed for his head. In one seemingly practiced motion, he pulled the ax from her hand, flung it away and swung her into his arms.

She wasn't about to give him the pleasure of struggling against him and instead she stiffened, hating the feel of his clothes against her skin. The fox pelt hung to one side, baring the leg against his body.

He carried her inside the tent and gently laid her on one of the cots.

"Why do you bother with clothes for me?" she hissed. "Perhaps you should do your coupling in the fields like the animal you are."

He walked away, his back to her, and poured two goblets of wine from a silver vessel on the table. "Elizabeth," he said, "if you keep asking me to make love to you, I will eventually succumb to your temptations." He turned, walked toward her and sat on a stool a few feet away. "You've had a long day and you must be tired and hungry." He held out a full wine goblet to her.

Elizabeth swept it away, the wine spilling, staining one of the luxurious carpets that comprised the floor of the tent.

Miles glanced at it, unconcerned, and drank his wine. "And now, Elizabeth, what am I to do with you?"

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