



Velvet Song (The Velvet Montgomery Annals Quadrilogy Book 3)

By Jude Deveraux

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They were both outcasts by a harsh decree -- and on the brink of a shared destiny of passion!

With her father murdered, her home burned, lovely Alyx Blackelt fled to the woods -- and sanctuary in the camp of Raine Montgomery, a nobleman outlawed by the king's edict. There she hid her beauty in the guise of a boy, and her sorrow in her work as Montgomery's squire.

But how long could such loveliness as hers be hidden? How long could such a gallant man's desires be blind? And how soon -- even as a blood feud raged between the Montgomerys and the Chatworths, as angry swords clattered in the name of family honor -- one woman's love would make all the difference...one woman's love would inflame a hero's passion, touch a king's pity, and raise a song of praise in every English heart.

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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 little village of Moreton was surrounded by a high stone wall, the gray of the stones casting a long, early-morning shadow over the many houses packed inside. Well-worn pathways connected the buildings, radiating out from the central position of the towering church and the tall white town hall. Now, in the dim light of the morning, a few dogs began to stretch, sleepy-eyed women lazily walked toward the town well and four men waited, with axes over their shoulders, while the gatekeepers opened the heavy oak gates in the stone wall.

Inside one house, a plain, narrow, two-story, whitewashed house, Alyxandria Blackett listened with every pore of her body for the creak of the gates. When she heard it, she grabbed her soft leather shoes and began tiptoeing toward the stairs, which were, unfortunately, on the other side of her father's bedroom. She'd been dressed for hours, waking long before the sun rose, slipping a plain, rather coarse woolen dress over her slight figure. And today, for once, she didn't look down in disgust at her body. It seemed that all her life she'd been waiting to grow up, to gain some height and, most of all, to gain some curves. But at twenty she knew she was always going to be flat-chested and hipless. At least, she thought with a sigh, she had no need for corsets. In her father's room, she tossed him a quick glance to make sure that he was sleeping, flipped the wool of her skirt over her arm and started down, skipping the fourth step, as she knew it creaked badly. Once downstairs she didn't dare open a window shutter. The sound might wake her father, and he very much needed his rest now. Skirting a table covered with papers and ink and a half-finished will her father was drafting, she went to the far wall, gazing up with love at the two musical instruments hanging there. All thoughts of self-pity for what God had forgotten in her physically disappeared when she thought of her music. Already a new tune was beginning to form in her head, a gentle, rolling melody. It was obviously a love song.

"Can't make up your mind?" came her father's voice from the foot of the stairs.

Instantly, she ran to him, put her arm around his waist and helped him sit at the table. Even in the dark room she could see the bluish circles under his eyes. "You should have stayed in bed. There's time enough to do a day's work without starting before daylight."

Catching her hand for a moment, he smiled up into her pretty eyes. He well knew what his daughter thought of her little elfin face with its tip-tilted violet eyes, tiny nose and curvy little mouth -- he'd certainly heard her wail about it enough -- but to him everything about her was dear. "Go on," he said, pushing her gently. "Go and see if you can choose which instrument to take and leave before someone comes and complains they must have a song for their latest love."

"Perhaps this morning I should stay with you," she whispered, her face showing her concern for him. Three times in the last year he'd had horrible pains in his heart.

"Alyx!" he warned. "Don't disobey me. Now gather your things and leave!"

"Yes, my lord," she laughed, giving what, to him, was a heart-melting smile, her eyes turning up at the corners, her mouth forming a perfect cupid's bow. With a swift, practiced gesture she pulled the long, steel-stringed cittern from the wall, leaving the psaltery where it was. Turning, she looked back at her father. "Are

you sure you'll be all right? I don't have to leave this morning."

Ignoring her, he handed her her scholar's box, a lap desk containing pen, ink and paper. "I'd rather have you creating music than staying home with a sick old man. Alyx," he cautioned. "Come here." With a familiar gesture he began to plait her long hair into a fat braid down her back. Her hair was heavy and thick, perfectly straight without a hint of curl and the color was, even to her father, very odd. It was almost as if a child had thrown together every hair color possible on one very small young woman's head. There were streaks of gold, bright yellow, deep red, a golden red, mouse brown and, Alyx swore, even some gray.

When her hair was braided, he pulled her cloak from the wall, put it about her shoulders and tied the hood over her head. "Don't get so engrossed you forget to stay warm," he said with mock fierceness, turning her about. "Now go, and when you return I want to hear something beautiful."

"I'll do my best," she said, laughing as she left the house, closing the door behind her.

From their house at the very back of the town wall, directly across from the big gates, Alyx could see nearly all of the town as the people were beginning to stir and get ready to greet the day. There was a matter of inches between the houses and in the tiny alleyway that ran along the wall. Half-timbered and stone, brick and stucco houses sat side by side, ranging in size from the mayor's house down to the tiny houses of the craftsmen and, like her father's, the lawyers'. A bit of breeze stiffed the air and the shop sips rattled.

"Good morning," a woman sweeping the gravel before her house called to Alyx. "Are you working on something for the church today?"

Slinging the cittern by its strap onto her back, she waved back at her neighbor. "Yes...and no. Everything!" She laughed, waving and hurrying toward the gate

Abruptly, she stopped as she nearly ran into a cart horse. One look up showed her that John Thorpe had purposefully tried to trip her.

"Hoa, now, little Alyx, not a kind word for me?" He grinned as she sidestepped the old horse.

"Alyx!" called a voice from the back of the wagon. Mistress Burbage was emptying chamber pots into the honey wagon John drove. "Could you come inside for a moment? My youngest daughter is heartbroken, and I thought perhaps a new love song might make her well."

"Aye, and for me," John laughed from atop the wagon. "I have need of a love song, too," he said, ostentatiously rubbing his side where two nights before Alyx had given him a fierce pinch when he'd tried to kiss her.

"For you, John," she said very sweetly, "I'll write a song as sweet as the honey in your wagon." The sound of his laughter almost bid her answer to Mistress Burbage that she'd see her after evening mass.

With a gasp, Alyx began to run toward the gate. In another few moments she'd get caught and would never get her time alone, outside the walls, to work on her music.

"Ye're late, Alyx," the gatekeeper said, "and don't forget the sweet music for my sick babe," he called after her as she ran toward the orchards outside the walls.

Finally, she reached her favorite apple tree and, with a laugh of sheer happiness, opened the little desk and set about preparing to make a record of the music she heard in her head. Sitting down, leaning back against the tree, she pulled her cittern across her lap and began to strum the tune she'd heard this morning. Totally absorbed, working with melody and lyrics, recording on paper the notes, she was unaware of the hours passing. When she came up for air, her shoulders stiff, fingers sore, she had written two songs and started on a new psalm for the church.

With a long, exuberant stretch, she set aside her cittern, rose and, one hand on a low, bare branch of the apple tree, gazed out across the fields of crops, past them to the earl's enclosed sheep pastures.

No! she would not let herself think of the earl, who'd pushed so many farmers from the land by raising their rents and then fencing it and filling the space with his profitable sheep. Think of something pleasant, she commanded herself, turning to look the other way. And, of course, what else was there really beautiful in life besides music?

As a child she'd always heard music in her head. While the priest droned on in Latin at Mass, she'd occupied her mind with creating a song for the boys' choir. At the Harvest Festival she wandered away, preoccupied

with songs only she could hear. Her father, a widower for years, had been nearly insane trying to find his lost child.

One day when she was ten, she'd gone to the well to draw water. A troubadour visiting the town had been sitting with a young woman on a bench, and beside the well, unattended, was his lute. Alyx had never touched any musical instrument before, but she'd heard enough and seen enough to know basically how to make a lute play. Within minutes, she'd plucked out one of the hundreds of tunes chorusing through her head. She was on her fourth song before she realized the troubadour was beside her, his courting forgotten. Silently, without a word between them, needing only the language of music, he had shown her how to place her fingers for the chords. The pain of the sharp strings cutting into her small, tender fingertips was nothing compared to her joy at being able to hear her music outside her mind.

Three hours later, when her father, with a resigned air, went to look for his daughter, he found her surrounded by half the townspeople, all of them whispering that they were seeing a miracle. The priest, seeing a wonderful possibility, took her to the church and set her before the virginals. After a few minutes of experimenting, Alyx began to play, badly at first, a magnificat, a song of praise to the church, softly speaking the words as she played.

Alyx's father was thoroughly relieved that his only child wasn't light in the head after all, that it was just so filled with music that sometimes she didn't respond to everything said to her. After that momentous day, the priest took over Alyx's training, saying her gift was from God and as God's spokesman, he would take charge of her. He didn't need to add that as a lawyer, her father was far away from God's holiness and the less she associated with such as him, the better.

There followed four years of rigorous training in which the priest managed the loan of every instrument created for Alyx to learn to play. She played the keyboard instruments, horns, strings with and without a bow, drums, bells and the huge pipe organ the priest shamed the town into buying for the Lord (and for him and Alyx, some said).

When the priest was sure she could play, he sent for a Franciscan monk who taught her how to write music, to record the songs, ballads, masses, litanies, whatever she could set to music.

Because she was so busy playing instruments and writing down notes, it wasn't until she was fifteen that anyone realized she could sing. The monk, who was nearly ready to return to his abbey, since Alyx had learned all he could teach her, walked into the church very early one morning and was surrounded by a voice so powerful he could feel the buttons on his cloak trembling. When he was able to convince himself that this magnificent sound came from his very small pupil, he fell to his knees and began to give thanks to God for letting him have contact with such a blessed child.

Alyx, when she saw the old monk on his knees at the back of the church, holding his cross tightly, tears running down his face, stopped singing immediately and ran to him, hoping he wasn't ill, or, as she suspected, offended at her singing, which she knew was dreadfully loud.

After that, as much attention was paid to her voice as to her playing and she began to arrange choral groups, using every voice in the little walled-off town.

Suddenly, she was twenty years old, expecting any day to grow up and, she desperately hoped, out. But she stayed little, and flat, while the other girls her age married and had babies, and Alyx had to be content to sing the lullabies she'd written to teething infants.

What right did she have to be discontent, she thought now, hanging onto the apple tree? Just because the young men all treated her with great respect -- except, of course, John Thorpe, who too often smelled like what he hauled -- was no reason to be discontent. When she was sixteen and of marriageable age and not so old as now, four men had offered her marriage, but the priest said her music was a sign that she was meant for God's work and not some man's lust and therefore refused to allow any marriage. Alyx, at the time, was relieved, but the older she got, the more she was aware of her loneliness. She loved her music and especially loved what she did for the church, but sometimes...like two summers ago when she'd had four glasses of very strong wine at the mayor's daughter's wedding, she grabbed her cittern, stood on a table and sang a very, very bawdy song, which she made up as she went along. Of course, the priest would have stopped her, but since

he'd had more wine than anyone else and was rolling in the grass, holding his stomach with laughter at Alyx's song, he certainly wasn't capable of stopping anyone. That had been a wonderful evening, when she'd been a part of the people she'd known all her life, not something set aside by the priest's command, rather like a holy bit of St. Peter's skull in the church, awe inspiring but far from touchable.

Now as she always did, she began to turn her thoughts to song. Breathing deeply, spacing her breath as she'd been taught, she began a ballad of life's loneliness, of a young woman seeking her own true love.

"And here I am, little songbird," came a man's voice from behind her.

So intent on singing -- and, indeed, her voice would have covered the sound -- she had not heard the young men on horseback approaching. There were three of them, all big, strong, healthy, lusty as only the nobility could be, their faces flushed from what she guessed to be a night of revelry. Their clothes, the fine velvets and fur linings with a jewel winking here and there, were things she'd seen only on the church altar. Dazed, she looked up at them, didn't even move when the largest blond man dismounted.

"Come, serf," he said, and his breath was foul. "Don't you even know your own lord? Allow me to introduce myself. Pagnell, soon to be Earl of Waldenham."

The name brought Alyx alive. The great, greedy, ugly Waldenham family drained the village farmers of every cent they had. When they had no more, the farmers were thrown off the land, left to die wandering the country, begging for their bread.

Alyx was just about to open her mouth to tell this foul young man what she thought of him when he grabbed her, his hideous mouth descending on hers, his tongue thrusting, making her gag.

"Bitch!" he gasped when she clamped her teeth down on his tongue. "I'll teach you who is the master." With one grasp, he tore her cloak away and instantly his hand was at the collar of her dress, tearing easily, exposing one small, vulnerable shoulder and the top of her breast.

"Shall we throw such a small fish back?" he taunted over his shoulder to his friends, who were dismounting. The reference to her lack of physical endowment above the waist was what changed Alyx's fear to anger. Although she may have been born this man's social inferior, her talent had caused her to be treated as no one's inferior. In a gesture none of the men expected, Alyx pulled up her skirt, raised her leg and viciously kicked Pagnell directly between the legs. The next instant pandemonium broke loose. Pagnell bent double in pain while his companions desperately tried to hear what he was saying as they were still much too drunk to fully comprehend what was going on.

Not sure where she was going or in which direction, Alyx began to run. Her lung power from her many years of breathing exercises held her in good stead. Across cold, barren fields she ran, stumbling twice, trying to hold her torn gown together, the skirt away from her feet.

At the second fence, the hated sheep enclosure, she stopped, slumped against the post, tears running down her face. But even through tears she could see the three horsemen as they combed the area looking for her.

"This way!" came a voice to her left. "This way!"

Looking up, she saw an older man on horseback, his clothes as rich and fine as Pagnell's. With the look of a trapped animal, she began to run again, away from this new man who pursued her.

Easily, he caught up with her, pacing beside her on his horse. "The boys mean no harm," he said. "They're just high-spirited and had a little too much to drink last night. If you'll come with me I'll get you away from them, hide you somewhere."

Alyx wasn't sure if she should trust him. What if he handed her over to those lecherous, drunken noblemen?

"Come on, girl," the man said. "I don't want to see you hurt."

Without another thought, she took the hand offered to her. He hauled her into the saddle before him and kicked the horse into a gallop, heading toward the faraway line of trees.

"The King's forest," Alyx gasped, holding onto the saddle for dear life. No commoner was allowed to enter the King's forest, and she'd seen several men hanged for taking rabbit from it.

"I doubt Henry will mind just this once," the man said.

As soon as they were inside the forest, he lowered her from his horse. "Now go and hide and do not leave this place until the sun is high. Wait until you see other serfs out about their business, then return to your

walls."

Wincing once at his calling her, a freewoman, a serf, she nodded and ran deeper into the forest.

Noon took a very long time in coming, and while she waited in the dark, cold forest in a torn dress without her cloak, she became fully aware of her terror at what could have happened at the hands of the nobles.

Perhaps it was her training by the priest and the monk that made her believe the nobles had no right to use her people as they wished. She had a right to peace and happiness, had a right to sit under a tree and play her music, and God gave no one the power to take such a thing away from another person.

After only an hour her anger kept her warm. Of course, she knew her anger came partly from a happening last summer. The priest had arranged for the boys' chorus and Alyx to sing in the earl's Pagnell's father's private chapel. For weeks they'd worked, Alyx always trying to perfect the music, driving herself to exhaustion rehearsing. When at last they had performed, the earl, a fat man ridden with gout, had said loudly he liked his women with more meat on them and for the priest to bring her back when she could entertain him somewhere besides church. He left before the service was finished.

When the sun was directly overhead, Alyx crept to the edge of the forest and spent a long time studying the countryside, seeing if she saw anyone who resembled a nobleman. Tentatively, she slowly made her way back to her apple tree -- hers no longer, as now it would carry too many ugly memories.

There Alyx suffered her greatest shock, for broken into shreds and splinters lay her cittern, obviously trampled and retrampled by horses' hoofs. Quick, hot tears of anger, hate, frustration, helplessness welled up through her body, spilling down her cheeks unheeded. How could they? she raged, kneeling, picking up a piece of wood. When her lap was full of splinters she saw the uselessness of what she was doing and with all her might began to fling the pieces against the tree.

Dry eyed, shoulders back, she started for the safety of her town, her anger capped for the moment but still very close to the surface.

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