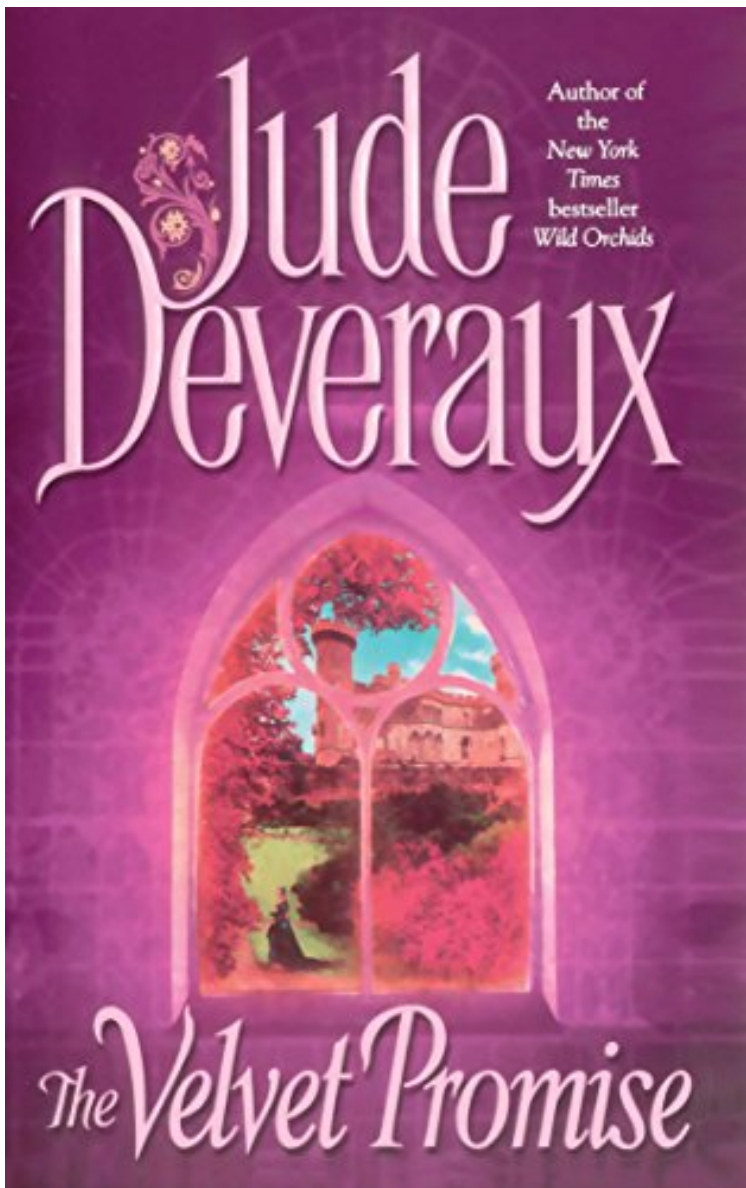


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The Velvet Promise



Par Jude Deveraux
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Chapter One
May 1892
Houston Chandler walked the block and a half to her house as sedately as she could manage, halting before a three-story, red brick French Victorian house that the town called the Chandler Mansion. Composing herself, smoothing her hair, she mounted the steps. As she put her parasol in the porcelain holder in the little vestibule, she heard her stepfather bellowing at her sister. "I'll not have language like that in my house. You may think that because you call yourself a doctor you have a right to indecent behavior, but not in my house," Duncan Gates shouted. Blair Chandler, as like her twin sister as another person can be, glared at the man, who was a few inches shorter than she was and built as solidly as a stone building. "Since when is this your house? My father -- ." Houston stepped into the family parlor and put herself between her sister and her stepfather. "Isn't it time for dinner? Perhaps we should go in." With her back to her stepfather, she gave a pleading look to her sister. Blair turned away from them both, her anger obvious. Duncan took Houston's arm and led her past the staircase and toward the dining room. "At least I have one decent daughter." Houston winced as she heard the often repeated remark. She hated being compared to Blair, and worse, hated being the winner. They were barely seated at the big, mahogany table, each setting laid with crystal, porcelain and sterling, Duncan at the head, Opal Gates at the foot, the twins across from each other, when he started again. "You'd think you'd want to do something to please your mother," Duncan said, glaring at Blair, as an eleven-pound roast was set before him. He picked up carving utensils. "Are you too selfish to care about anybody else? Doesn't your mother mean anything to you?" Blair, her jaw clenched, looked at her mother. Opal was like a faded copy of her beautiful daughters. It was obvious that what spirit she'd ever had was either gone or deeply buried. "Mother," Blair said, "do you want me to return to Chandler, marry some fat banker, have a dozen children and give up medicine?" Opal smiled fondly at her daughter as she took a small helping of eggplant from the platter held by a maid. "I want you to be happy, dear, and I believe it's rather noble of you to want to save people's lives." Blair turned triumphant eyes toward her stepfather. "Houston's given up her life in order to please you. Isn't that enough for you? Do you have to see me broken too?" "Houston!" Duncan thundered, clutching the big carving knife until his knuckles were white. "Are you going to allow your sister to say such things?" Houston looked from her sister to her stepfather. Under no circumstances did she want to side with either one of them. When Blair returned to Pennsylvania after the wedding, Houston'd still be in the same town with her stepfather. With joy, she heard the downstairs maid announce Dr. Leander Westfield. Quickly, Houston stood. "Susan," she said to the serving maid, "set another place." Leander walked into the room with long, confident strides. He was tall, slim, dark, extremely good-looking with green eyes to die for, as a friend of Houston's once said -- and exuded an air of self-assurance that made women stop on the street and stare. He greeted Mr. and Mrs. Gates. Leander leaned across the edge of the table and gave Houston a quick kiss on the cheek. Kissing a woman, even your wife, and certainly your fiance, so publicly was outrageous, but Leander had an air about him that allowed him to get away with things other men couldn't. "Will you have dinner with us?" Houston asked politely, indicating the place set next to her. "I've eaten, but maybe I'll join you for a cup of coffee. Good evening, Blair," he said as he sat down across from her. Blair only glanced at him in answer as she poked at the food on her plate. "Blair, you'll speak to Leander properly," Duncan commanded. "That's all right, Mr. Gates," Leander replied pleasantly, but looking at Blair in puzzlement. He smiled at Houston. "You're as pretty as a bride today." "Bride!" Blair gasped, standing and nearly upsetting her chair before she ran from the room. "Why, that -- ," Duncan began, putting down his fork and starting to rise. But Houston stopped him. "Please don't. Something's upsetting her badly. Perhaps she misses her friends in Pennsylvania. Leander, didn't you want to talk to me about the wedding? Could we go now?" "Of course." Leander silently escorted her to his waiting buggy, clucked to the horse and drove her up the steep end of Second Street and parked on one of the many dead ends in Chandler. It was beginning to get dark and the mountain air was growing cold. Houston moved back into the corner of the carriage. "Now, tell me what's going on," he said as he tied the horse's reins, put on the brake, and turned to her. "It seems to me that you're as upset as Blair." Houston had to blink back tears. It was so good to be alone with Lee. He was so familiar, so safe. He was an oasis of sanity in her life. "It's Mr. Gates. He's always antagonizing Blair, telling her she's no good, reminding her that even as a child he thought there was no hope for her, and he's always demanding that she give up medicine and remain in Chandler. And, Lee, he keeps telling Blair how perfect I am." "Ah, sweetheart," Lee said, pulling her into his arms, "you are perfect.

You're sweet and kind and pliable and -- ." She pulled away from him. "Pliable! You mean like taffy?" "No," Lee smiled at her, "I just meant that you're a pretty, sweet woman, and I think it's good of you to be so worried about your sister, but I also think Blair should have been prepared for some criticism when she became a doctor." "You don't think she should give up medicine, do you?" "I have no idea what your sister should do. She's not my responsibility." He reached for her again. "What are we talking about Blair for? We have our own lives to live." As he spoke, his arms tightened around her and he began to nuzzle her ear. This was the part of their courtship Houston always hated. Lee was so easy to be around, someone she knew so well. After all, they'd been a "couple" since she was six and he was twelve. Now, at twenty-two, she'd spent a great deal of time near Leander Westfield, had known forever that she was going to be Mrs. Westfield. All her schooling, everything she'd ever learned was in preparation for the day she'd be Lee's wife. But a few months ago, after he'd returned from studying in Europe, he'd started this kissing, pushing her into the buggy seat, groping at her clothes, and all she'd felt was that she wished he'd stop fumbling at her. Then Lee'd get angry, once again call her an ice princess, and take her home. Houston knew how she was supposed to react to Lee's touch. For all its appearance of staidness, Chandler, Colorado, was an enlightened town -- at least its women were -- but for the life of her Houston felt nothing when Lee touched her. She'd cried herself to sleep with worry many times. She couldn't imagine loving anyone more than she loved Leander, but she was just not excited by his touch. He seemed to sense what Houston was thinking and drew away from her, his anger showing in his eyes. "It's fewer than three weeks," she said with hope in her voice. "In a short time we'll be married and then..." "And then what?" he said, looking at her sideways. "The ice princess melts?" "I hope so," she whispered, mostly to herself. "No one hopes so more than I do." They were silent for a moment. "Are you ready for the governor's reception tomorrow?" Lee asked, pulling a long cheroot from his pocket and lighting it. Houston gave him a trembling smile. These few minutes after she'd turned him down were always the worst. "My Worth gown's steamed and ready." "The governor will love you, you know that?" He smiled at her, but she sensed he was forcing the smile. "Someday I'll have the most beautiful wife in the state at my side." She tried to relax. A governor's reception was a place she felt confident. This was something she was trained for. Perhaps she should have taken a course in how not to be a cold, sexless wife. She knew that some men thought their wives shouldn't enjoy sex, but she also knew Leander was like no one else. He'd explained to her that he expected her to enjoy him and Houston'd told herself she would, but mostly she felt annoyed when Leander kissed her. "I have to go to town tomorrow," he said, interrupting her thoughts. "Want to come along?" "I'd love to. Oh! Blair wanted to stop by the newspaper office. I believe someone sent her a new medical journal from New York." Houston leaned back in the carriage as Leander clucked to the horse and wondered what he'd say if he knew his "pliable" intended was, once a week, doing something that was quite illegal. Blair lounged against the end of the ornate, canopied, walnut bed, one knee bent, showing the separation of her Turkish pants. Her big blue and white room was on the third floor, with a beautiful view of Ayers Peak out the west window. She'd had a room on the second floor with the rest of the family, but after she'd left Chandler when she was twelve, Opal'd become pregnant and Mr. Gates had made her room into a bath and a nursery. Opal lost the child and the room stood unused now, filled with dolls and toy soldiers Mr. Gates had bought. "I really don't see why we have to go with Leander," Blair said to Houston who sat quite straight on a white brocade chair. "I haven't seen you in years and now I have to share you." Houston gave her sister a little smile. "Leander asked us to accompany him, not the other way around. Sometimes I think you don't like him. But I can't see how that could be possible. He's kind, considerate, he has position in the community and he --." "And he completely owns you!" Blair exploded, jumping up from the bed, startling Houston with the strength of her outburst. "Don't you realize that in school I worked with women like you, women who were so unhappy they repeatedly attempted suicide?" "Suicide? Blair, I have no idea what you're talking about. I have no intention of killing myself." Houston couldn't help drawing away from her sister's vehemence. "Houston," Blair said quietly, "I wish you could see how much you've changed. You used to laugh, but now you're so distant. I understand that you've had to adjust to Gates, but why would you choose to marry a man just like him?" Houston stood, putting her hand on the walnut dresser and idly touching Blair's silver-backed hairbrush. "Leander isn't like Mr. Gates. He's really very different. Blair" -- she looked at her sister in the big mirror -- "I love Leander," she said softly. "I have for years, and all I've ever wanted to do is get married, have children and raise my family. I never wanted to do anything great or noble like you seem to want to do. Can't you see that I'm happy?" "I wish I could believe you," Blair said sincerely. "But something keeps me from it. I guess I hate the way Leander treats you, as if you were already his. I see the two of you together and you're like a couple who've lived together for twenty

years." "We have been together a long time." Houston turned back to face her sister. "What should I look for in a husband if it isn't compatibility?" "It seems to me that the best marriages are between people who find each other interesting. You and Leander are too much alike. If he were a woman, he'd be a perfect lady." "Like me," Houston whispered. "But I'm not always a lady. There are things I do --." "Like Sadie?" "How did you know about that?" Houston asked. "Meredith told me. Now, what do you think your darling Leander is going to say when he finds out that you're putting yourself in danger every Wednesday? And how will it look for a surgeon of his stature to be married to a practicing criminal?" "I'm not a criminal. I'm doing something that's good for the whole town," Houston said with fire, then quieted. She slipped another hairpin invisibly into the neat chignon at the back of her head. Carefully arranged curls framed her forehead beneath a hat decorated with a spray of iridescent blue feathers. "I don't know what Leander will say. Perhaps he won't find out." "Hah! That pompous, spoiled man will forbid you to participate in anything dealing with the coal miners and, Houston, you're so used to obeying that you'll do exactly what he says." "Perhaps I should give up being Sadie after I'm married," she said with a sigh. Suddenly, Blair dropped to her knees on the carpet and took Houston's hands. "I'm worried about you. You're not the sister I grew up with. Gates and Westfield are eating away at your spirit. When we were children, you used to throw snowballs with the best of them but now it's as if you're afraid of the world. Even when you do something wonderful like drive a huckster wagon, you do it in secret. Oh, Houston -- ." She broke off at a knock on the door. "Miss Houston, Dr. Leander is here." "Yes, Susan, I'll be right down." Houston smoothed her skirt. "I'm sorry you find me so much to your distaste," she said primly, "but I do know my own mind. I want to marry Leander because I love him." With that, she swept out of the room, and went downstairs. Houston tried her best to push Blair's words from her mind but she couldn't. She greeted Leander absently and was vaguely aware of a quarrel going on between Lee and Blair, but she really heard nothing except her own thoughts. Blair was her twin, they were closer than ordinary sisters and Blair's concern was genuine. Yet, how could Houston even think of not marrying Leander? When Leander was eight years old, he'd decided he was going to be a doctor, a surgeon who saved people's lives, and by the time Houston met him, when he was twelve, Lee was already studying textbooks borrowed from a distant cousin. Houston decided to find out how to be a doctor's wife. Neither wavered from his decision. Lee went to Harvard to study medicine, then to Vienna for further study, and Houston went to finishing schools in Virginia and Switzerland. Houston still winced whenever she thought of the argument she and Blair'd had about her choice of schools. "You're going to give up an education just so you can learn to set a table, so you can learn how to walk into a room wearing fifty yards of heavy satin and not fall on your face?" Blair went to Vassar, then medical school, while Houston went to Miss Jones's School for Young Ladies where she was put through years of rigorous training in everything from how to arrange flowers to how to stop men from arguing at the dinner table. Now, Lee took her arm as he helped her into the buggy. "You look as good as always," he said close to her ear. "Lee," Houston said, "do you think we find each other...interesting?" With a smile, his eyes raked down her body, over the dress that glued itself to her tightly corseted, exaggerated hourglass figure. "Houston, I find you fascinating." "No, I mean, do we have enough to talk about?" He raised one eyebrow. "It's a wonder I can remember how to talk when I'm around you," he answered as he helped her into his buggy, and drove them the six blocks into the heart of Chandler. Copyright 1985 by Deveraux Inc. Presentation de l'diteur All of England rejoiced on her wedding day. But Judith vowed that her husband would get only what he took from her! At the flower-bedecked altar, the first touch of their hands ignited an all-consuming passion. Gavin Montgomery looked deep into her golden eyes and burned with desire for her...but his heart had been pledged to another. Humiliated and alone in a strange castle, Judith resolved to hate this husband who took her body, but rejected her love...never admitting her fear of losing him. But destiny held another fate for Judith...a fate that would keep at last...The Velvet Promise.