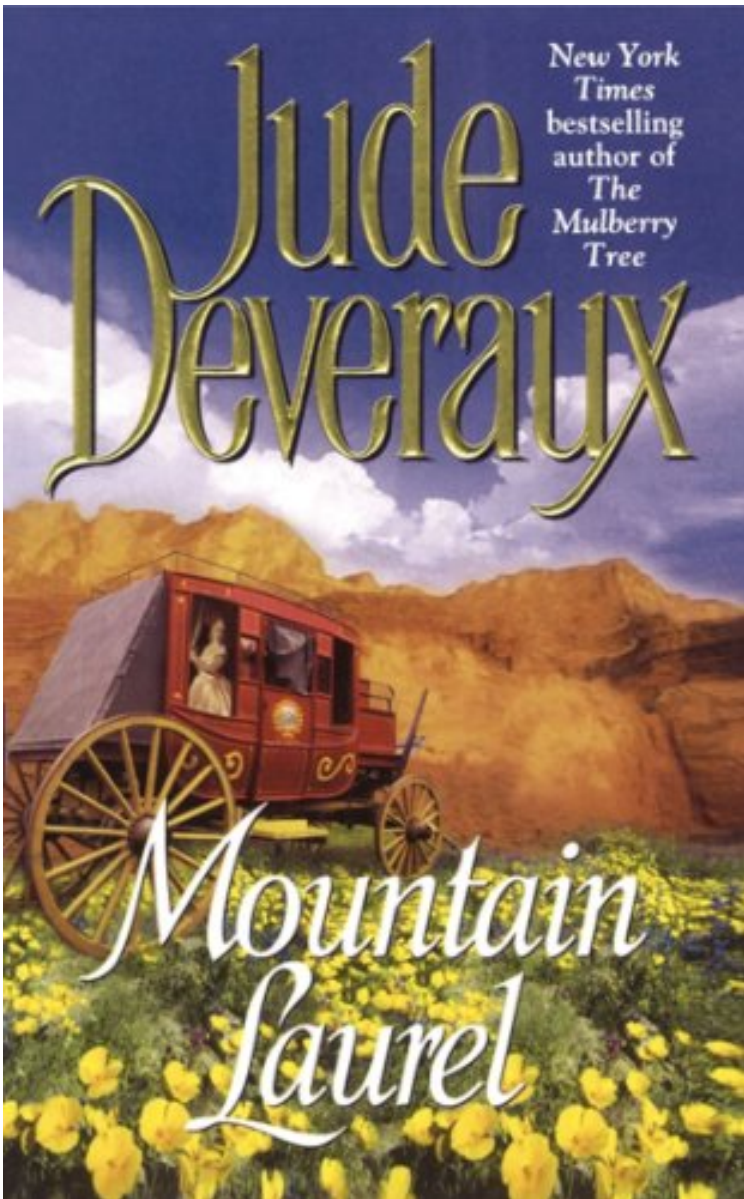


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Mountain Laurel



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Prsentation de l'diteur Captain Ring Montgomery was handsome, a skilled rider, a crack shot, popular with the men and their ladies. That was reason enough for a jealous, surly colonel to saddle Montgomery with a most peculiar assignment: to escort an opera singer into the Colorado gold fields. Ring's plan was to scare the little lady enough so that she'd hightail it for home. After all, a Civil War was brewing! But LaReina, The Singing Duchess -- as Maddie Worth called herself on stage -- didn't scare easy. And she didn't intend to explain her reasons for coming West to any high and mighty soldier. Captain Montgomery might be smart enough to figure out that she was no European duchess, and gentleman enough not to take advantage of her when he'd had the chance, but he'd have to go on thinking she had some insane desire to sing opera to a bunch of ragtag miners. She didn't dare trust him with the truth....

Extrait "Chapter 1" Colonel Harrison read the letter a second time, then leaned back in his chair and smiled. The answer to a prayer, he thought. That was the only way to describe the letter: the answer to a prayer. Just to make sure it did indeed say what he thought it did, he looked at the letter again. General Yovington had issued orders from Washington, D.C., that Lieutenant L. K. Surrey was to leave the post of Company J, Second Dragoons, for a special assignment. But since Lieutenant Surrey had died just last week, Colonel Harrison would have to choose someone to take the assignment in his place. Colonel Harrison's smile grew broader. He was choosing Captain C. H. Montgomery to take Lieutenant Surrey's place. The lieutenant, now replaced by Captain Montgomery, was "requested" to escort a foreign opera singer into the gold fields of the Colorado Territory. He was to remain with her and her small band of musicians and servants as long as the lady needed him. He was to protect her from any dangers she would possibly encounter on her journey and to do what he could to make her travels more comfortable. Colonel Harrison put the letter down, handling it as though it were a precious relic, and smiled so broadly his face nearly cracked. Lady's maid, he thought. The high and mighty Captain: Montgomery was being ordered to be nothing more than a lady's maid. But, more important, Captain Montgomery was being ordered away from Fort Breck. Colonel Harrison took a few deep, cleansing breaths and thought about having his own fort to command, and about not having to deal with the perfection, the cool knowledge of Captain Montgomery. No longer would the men look to their captain for confirmation of every order, for permission to do: what their colonel asked of them. Colonel Harrison thought back to when he first came to Fort Breck a year ago. His predecessor, Colonel Collins, had been a drunken, lazy old fool. Collins's only concern had been surviving until he could retire, get out of Indian country and go back to Virginia, where people lived in a civilized manner. He was content to turn over all responsibility to his second-in-command, Captain Montgomery. And why not? Montgomery's record had to be seen to be believed. He'd been in the army since he was eighteen, and in the ensuing eight years he'd worked himself up through the ranks. He'd started as a private, and, after extraordinary heroism on the field of battle, he'd been made an officer. He'd gone from second lieutenant to captain in a mere three years, and at the rate he was going he'd outrank Colonel Harrison in another few years. Not that the man didn't deserve everything he'd ever earned in the army. No, as far as Colonel Harrison could tell, Captain Montgomery was perfect. He was cool under fire, never losing his head. He was generous, fair, and understanding with the enlisted men, and as a result they pretty much thought he ran the fort. The officers went to him with their problems; the officers' ladies fawned over him and asked his advice about social events. Captain Montgomery didn't drink, didn't patronize the whores outside the fort; he'd never lost his temper as far as anyone knew, and he could do anything. He could ride like a demon and, while at a full gallop, shoot the eye out of a turkey from a hundred yards away. He knew Indian sign language and a smattering of several Indian languages. Hell, even the Indians liked him, said he was a man they could respect and trust. No doubt Captain Montgomery would die before he broke his word. Everyone in the world seemed to like, honor, respect, even revere Captain Montgomery. Everyone, that is, except Colonel Harrison. Colonel Harrison loathed the man. Not just disliked him, not just hated him, but loathed him. Everything the captain could do that the colonel couldn't made the colonel despise him more. The enlisted men saw within a week after the colonel's arrival that Harrison didn't know anything about the West, and the truth was, this was the first time in his life the colonel had been west of the Mississippi. Captain Montgomery hadn't volunteered to help the colonel learn the ropes; no, he was much too polite for that, but, in the end the colonel had had to ask him some questions. The captain had always known the answer, always known the best way to settle any dispute. It was after Colonel Harrison had been at Fort Breck for five months that he began to hate the man who had all the answers. Of course, having a sixteen-year-old daughter who practically swooned at the sight of the man, didn't help matters. Colonel Harrison's resentment had come to a head one hot morning the previous summer when, in a vile mood, the colonel had ordered a man who had done no more than oversleep reveille to be

punished with twenty lashes. He was sick unto death of the drunkenness of his men and meant to make an example of the private. He ignored the looks of hatred from the other men, but his stomach began to hurt. He wasn't a bad man; he just wanted to enforce discipline at his post. When Captain Montgomery stepped forward to protest the punishment, Colonel Harrison saw red. He informed the captain that he was in charge of the fort, and unless the captain meant to take the man's punishment, he was to stay out of this. It wasn't until Montgomery began removing his jacket that the colonel realized what he meant to do. It was the worst morning of the colonel's life, and he dearly wished he could go back to bed and start the day over. Captain Montgomery -- the fearless, perfect Captain Montgomery took all twenty of the man's lashes. For a while the colonel thought he was going to have a mutiny on his hands when all the enlisted men refused to wield the whip. In the end a second lieutenant applied the whip to Montgomery's broad back, and when he was finished he threw the whip into the dirt and turned on the colonel, his eyes blazing with hatred. "Anything else...sir?" he'd asked, sneering the last word. For two weeks hardly anyone on the post spoke to the colonel -- including his own wife and daughter. As for the captain, he was back on duty the next morning without so much as a grimace of pain for a back that must have been killing him. That he wouldn't even commit himself to the infirmary for a few days was the last straw. From that day on, Colonel Harrison didn't even bother trying to conceal his loathing for the captain. Of course the captain never once betrayed what he felt for the colonel; no, perfect human beings like Montgomery don't give away what they feel. He just continued to be the perfect officer a friend to the men, a charming escort to the ladies. A man trusted by all. A man who, as far as Colonel Harrison could tell, had no feelings. A man who never woke up on the wrong side of the bed. A man who never tripped on his horse's stirrup or missed whatever he was aiming to shoot. A man who would probably smile in the face of death. But now, Colonel Harrison thought, now he was going to get rid of this perfect man. Now General Yovington had requested an escort for some opera singer through gold country, and he was going to send the illustrious Captain Montgomery. "I hope she's fat," the colonel said aloud. "I hope she's real fat." "Sir?" his corporal asked from his desk on the other side of the room. "Nothing," the colonel barked. "Send Captain Montgomery to me, then leave us." The colonel ignored the look the corporal gave him. Promptly, as always, Captain Montgomery appeared and the colonel tried to keep from frowning. There wasn't a speck of dust on the captain's dark blue uniform, which he suspected had been privately tailored to fit the captain's six-foot-three-inch frame. "You wanted to see me, sir?" Captain Montgomery asked, standing at attention. Colonel Harrison wondered if the man could slump. "I have orders for you from General Yovington. Ever hear of him?" "Yes, sir." "What had the colonel expected, that Montgomery didn't know the answer to something? He rose from behind his desk, put his hands behind his back, and began to walk about the room. He must try to keep the joy from his voice. "As you know, General Yovington is a very important man and he has reasons for what he does. He does not allow people like you and me to know those reasons, but then, you and I are mere soldiers and ours is to obey, not to question the reason behind an order." He looked at the captain. There was no impatience on his face, no annoyance, just that calm look he always wore. Perhaps the colonel could break that perfect calm. He'd give a month's pay to be able to do that. The colonel went to the desk and picked up the letter. "I received this by special courier this morning. It seems to be of utmost importance. The general, for whatever reasons, seems to have formed an, ah...attachment to an opera singer and now that...lady wants to sing for the gold miners. He wants her to have an army escort." The colonel looked hard at Captain Montgomery, his eyes wide, for he didn't want to miss the man's reaction. "The general requested Lieutenant Surrey, but as you well know, the poor unfortunate man won't be able to make it, therefore I've thought long and hard about a suitable replacement, and I have chosen you, Captain." Colonel Harrison almost did a little jump of joy when Montgomery blinked twice and then tightened his lips. "You're to keep her out of trouble, see that the Indians don't bother her, keep the miners from making advances toward her, see that she's comfortable. I guess that means see that she's fed and that her bath water's hot and --" "I respectfully decline the assignment, sir," Captain Montgomery said, his back straight, his eyes straight ahead, which was some inches over the colonel's graying head. Colonel Harrison's heart swelled. "This is not a request, it's an order. You are not being asked, you are being told. It is not an invitation you can refuse." To the colonel's astonishment, Montgomery dropped his rigid posture and, without being given permission, he sat down in a chair, then withdrew a thin cigar from inside his jacket. "An opera singer? What the hell do I know about an opera singer?" The colonel knew he should reprimand the captain for sitting without permission, but if he'd learned nothing else in the last year, he'd at least learned that the western army was not like in the East, where discipline was understood. Besides, he was enjoying the perfect captain's consternation too much. "Oh, come now, Captain,

you can figure it out. Who better than you? Why, in all my twenty years of service I've never seen a man with a better record. Commissioned on the field of battle, an indispensable right-hand man to any officer. You've fought Indians and whites, You've rounded up outlaws and renegades. You're a man's man and yet you can advise the ladies on how to set a table, and according to what I hear from the ladies, you dance divinely." He smiled when Captain Montgomery gave him a malevolent look. He hadn't broken that facade even on the day he'd taken the twenty lashes for the private. "What's Yovington to her?" "General Yovington didn't make me his confidant. He merely sent his orders. You're to leave in the morning. As far as I can tell, the woman has already reached the mountains on her own. You'll recognize her by..." He picked up the letter, trying hard to conceal his smile. "She's traveling in a modified Concord wagon. It's red and it has, ah...let's see, the name LaReina painted on the side. LaReina is the woman's name. I hear she's very good. At singing, I mean. I don't know what else she's good at besides singing. The general didn't tell me that." "She's traveling in a stagecoach?" "A red one." Colonel Harrison permitted himself a small smile. "Oh, come now, Captain, surely this isn't a bad assignment. Think how this will look on your record. Think where this could lead. If you perform this duty well, you could start escorting generals' daughters. I'm sure my own daughter would give you a recommendation." Abruptly, Captain Montgomery stood. "With all due respect, sir, I cannot do this. There is too much unrest now and I am needed elsewhere. There are white settlers to protect, and what with this slavery controversy and the possibility of war, I do not believe I can desert my post to --" "Colonel Harrison lost his sense of humor. "Captain, this is not a request. This is an order. Whether you like it or not, you are on an assignment of indefinite length. You are to stay with this woman as long as she wants, go wherever she wants, do whatever needs to be done, even if it is no more than pull her coach out of the mud. If you don't do this, I will slap you in jail, court-martial you, find you guilty, and have you shot, And if I have to, I'll pull the trigger myself. Is that understood? Do I make myself clear?" "Very clear, sir," Captain Montgomery answered tightly. "All right, then, go and pack. You're to leave at dawn tomorrow." The colonel watched as the captain seemed to be trying to say something. "What is it?" he snapped. "Toby," was all the captain could get out through a jaw tight with anger. So, the captain did have a temper, the colonel thought, and he was tempted to antagonize him further by insisting that the orders had not included the garrulous, scrawny little private who was never more than a few feet from the captain's side. But the colonel remembered too well the anger of the enlisted men the day the captain had taken an enlisted man's lashes. "Take him," the colonel said. "He'll be of no use here." The captain nodded his thanks but didn't speak them as he turned on his heel and left the colonel's office. After the captain was gone, the colonel sank onto his hard chair and let out a sigh of relief, but at the same time he was a little nervous. Could he control this unruly fort, where most of the "soldiers" were farmers who'd signed up merely to fill their bellies? Half of them were drunk most of the time, and desertion was rampant. For the last year his record had been excellent, but he knew that was due a great deal to Captain Montgomery. Could he rule the fort on his own? "Damn him!" he said, and slammed a desk drawer shut in anger. Of course he could command his own fort! Ring Montgomery stared at the woman through the spyglass for a long moment, then angrily slammed it closed. "That her?" Toby asked from behind him. "You sure she's the one?" He was a foot shorter than Ring, wiry, and had skin the color of walnut juice. "How many other women would be fool enough to travel alone to a town of forty thousand men?" Toby took the spyglass and looked through it. They were standing on a hill looking down into a pretty valley where a bright new red stagecoach sat, glittering in the setting sun, a tent not far away. In front of the coach was a woman sitting at a table, slowly eating her dinner while a thin, blonde woman served her. Toby lowered the glass. "What d'you think she's eatin'? It looks like somethin' green on her plate. Do you think it's peas? Maybe string beans. Or is it just green meat like the army has?" "I couldn't care less what she's eating. Damn Harrison! Damn him to hell and back! Incompetent bastard! Just because he can't run a fort the size of Breck, he sends me off to do his dirty work." Toby yawned. He'd heard this a thousand times. He'd been with Ring since Ring was a boy, and he might seem stoic to others but Toby knew the truth. "You oughta be thankin' the man. He got us out of that godforsaken fort and put us out here where the gold's ours to be had." "We have an assignment, and I mean to fulfill it." "You is right. I ain't part of the army." Ring started to remind Toby of the uniform he wore, but he knew it was a waste of breath. Toby had joined the army because Ring had and for no other reason. The purpose of the army, the work that needed to be done, meant nothing to Toby. But it meant everything to Ring. He'd joined the army before his first beard had fully grown, and he'd always tried to do his best, to always be fair, to see what needed to be done and do it. He'd been quite successful and quite happy until last year, when Colonel Harrison had become his commanding officer. Harrison was an incompetent fool, a man who'd

never seen any action, a desk officer who had been sent west and had no idea what to do. He'd dumped his anger at his own incompetency on his captain's shoulders, making 'Ring take the blame for what the colonel couldn't do. "She's eatin' somethin' else too," Toby said, looking through the spyglass. "You think it's lettuce? Maybe carrots. You think it's somethin' besideshardtack?" "What the hell do I care what she's eating?" He walked away from the ridge. "We have to make a plan. First of all, she's either a good woman or a bad one. If she's good, she has no business being out here alone, and if she's bad, she doesn't need an escort. Either way, she has no need for me." "What's that say on her door?" 'Ring paused in pacing and grimaced. "LaReina, the Singing Duchess." He looked back down at the red coach. "Toby, we have to do something about this. We cannot allow this young woman to go into the gold-mining area. I'm sure she knows nothing about what she's getting into, If she knew the many dangers she faced, I'm sure she would return to her point of origin." "Her point of -- ?" Toby said. "Origin. Where she came from." "You know, I was just wonderin' how she got this far by herself. You think she drove that coach herself?" "Heavens, no! A Concord isn't easy to drive." "Then where are her drivers?" "I don't know," 'Ring said, waving his hand in dismissal. "Perhaps they've deserted her to work in the gold fields. Perhaps the woman will be grateful if I explain to her the hazards involved in a journey such as she's planning." "Humph!" Toby snorted. "I ain't never yet seen or heard tell of a woman that was grateful for anything." 'Ring took the spyglass from Toby and looked through it again. "Look at her, sitting there calmly eating, and unless I miss my guess, that is very fine china she's eating from. She doesn't look like a woman who is used to the hardship of a gold camp." "She looks pretty fine to me. Big top on her. I like the top half to be big. And the bottom half, too, if the truth be told. I can't see her face from here." "She's an opera singer!" 'Ring snapped. "She's not a dance-hall girl." "I see. Dance-hall girls sleep with miners and opera singers sleep with generals." 'Ring glared at him and Toby glared back until 'Ring walked away. "All right, here's the plan: We show her a little of what the West is really like, what she can expect in the camps." "You ain't plannin' to use her for target practice, are you?" "Of course not. I'll just, maybe, well, scare her a little bit. Put some sense into her." "Great," Toby said with a sigh. "Then we can go back to Fort Breck and Colonel Harrison. That man's gonna be as glad to see you as he would be to see a pack of Apaches. He don't like you none at all." "The feeling is mutual. Yes, we'll return to Fort Breck, but I'll put in for a transfer." "Good. In four, five years we should be able to get out of the place. By then you ain't gonna have no skin left on your back from tryin' to play the hero and impress the men." "It was something that had to be done, and I did it," 'Ring said as though from rote, for he'd said this a thousand times to Toby. "Like you gotta go scare this lady now, is that it? How come you don't just go tell her you don't wanta ride around the gold fields with her?" "It must be the woman's decision to return to civilization. Otherwise, I am not free from my duties and obligations to her." "So maybe you're plannin' to scare her for yourself and not to save any of her skin." "You have a very pessimistic outlook on life. It would be the best thing for both of us if she were to turn back. Now, are you coming with me or not?" "I wouldn't miss this for the world. Maybe she'll offer us somethin' to eat, but I sure hope she don't sing. I sure do hate opery." 'Ring straightened his uniform, adjusted the heavy, long saber at his side. "Let's get this over with. I have many things to do back at the fort." "Like keepin' ol' man Harrison from killin' you?" 'Ring didn't answer as he mounted his horse. Copyright 1990 by Dereraux Inc. From Publishers Weekly Maddie Worth, blackmailed into carrying letters between abolitionist spies who hold her sister captive, resents the authoritarian presence of Captain Ring Montgomery, who helps her navigate the gold fields of Colorado. "Deveraux fans may find the plot a little thin, but will welcome yet another pair of feisty, independent souls whose conversation crackles with electricity," said PW. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.