

Chapter 1

April 1863

LUKE TIGHTENED THE RAWHIDE STRAPS AROUND THE BELLY OF one of the mules that carried his supplies. “Suck in that gut, you stubborn ass,” he muttered. “I’m not going to hold up this wagon train because you spill my supplies all over the place.”

The animal brayed loudly, and people turned to stare. “Shut up, damn it,” he ordered the mule, yanking harder. It embarrassed him to have everyone witness his struggle with the obstinate animal.

He figured there were plenty of others amid this crowd headed west who were even less prepared for what lay ahead of them than he was. Including the children, there were about a hundred people camped here outside of Independence. He had counted eighteen wagons. He himself had decided against bothering with a wagon and oxen. His horse and four pack mules were enough. Some of his fellow travelers were herding cattle and extra horses as well, some had chickens with them, a few had pigs. Most of them were headed for California or Oregon, many fleeing the hideous War between the States and the ugly raiding that had been taking place between Kansas and Missouri. He had his own reasons for heading west, but they had nothing to do with the war.

He finished buckling the strap. He hated mules, much preferred horses. But he had taken the advice of experienced scouts back in St. Louis that mules were much better suited to

carrying heavy loads for long distances, and it was a long way to Montana. As far as he was concerned, California and Oregon were already too heavily settled. He was going to a place where a man could still claim big pieces of land, where there was still hardly any law. That way a man could do whatever was necessary to keep his land without answering to anyone but himself. This wagon train would get him as far as Wyoming. From then on, he would be on his own. The prospect was exhilarating. He was determined to show his father and his brother that he didn't need the inheritance money that had been denied him. To hell with them both! His father could believe what he wanted. He knew in his heart he was not a bastard. He had every right to the Fontaine money, and he swore that someday he would be a hundred times richer than his father, and he would do it all on his own.

The crack of a gunshot startled him out of his thoughts. Horses whinnied, and a woman began railing at her husband for being careless with a handgun. When Luke looked up, a couple of horses had bolted at the noise of the gunshot and were running toward him.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. "Nathan!" a young woman shouted frantically. Luke turned to see a towheaded little boy running toward him from another direction, a stuffed animal in his arms, a big grin on his chubby face. The boy obviously thought his mother was playing a game by chasing him, but his path was taking him on a collision course with the runaway horses.

Luke ran to the boy, lifting him with one strong arm a split second before the horses would have trampled him. He ducked aside, landing on the ground and covering the child. He felt a blow on his right calf from a horse's hoof and grimaced with pain, wondering why it had to be that particular spot. He still suffered enough pain there from his war wound. He didn't need a horse's kick to awaken the agony. He heard the shouts of "whoa," felt people gather near him. Someone grabbed the little boy right out of his arms.

"Nathan! Nathan!"

A couple of men helped Luke to his feet, asked if he was all right. They held his arms as Luke limped over to a log

to sit down. "I'll be fine," he insisted, rubbing at his leg. "Just got a little kick." He decided not to mention the war wound. In crowds like this there was usually a good mixture of Northerners and Southerners. Mentioning he'd fought for the Union army just might start a needless argument, and for the next four months or so, they all had to forget their differences and band together for the journey west.

"Sorry, mister," a man spoke up. "I accidentally spooked my horses."

"Don't worry about it," Luke answered. "I'm okay. All of you can get back to whatever you were doing."

The man who had misfired his gun apologized again, this time to a woman standing near Luke. "Thank God your boy wasn't hurt," he told her.

"It was partly my fault," the woman answered. "Nathan has just found his legs, and he is always running. He thinks it's a game. I think I shall have to put a rope on him and tie it to my own waist."

"Might be a good idea, ma'am." The man left to collect his horses, and Luke looked up at the woman who held the towheaded youngster he had just rescued. The boy still clung to his stuffed animal, which Luke could see was a homemade brown horse. Part of a feather from the stuffing stuck out of one of the seams. The child was still grinning, oblivious to the danger he'd been in. His mother chided him for running away from her.

"I don't know how to thank you, sir," she told Luke then. "Nathan could have been killed if not for your quick thinking. I do hope you're not badly hurt."

For the first time Luke truly noticed her and was surprised at how pretty she was. That thought had barely registered before it was eclipsed by the pain in his leg and his irritation at how the whole morning had gone for him.

"I don't think so," he answered, "but you ought to keep a better eye on the boy there. On a trip like we'll be taking, you'll have to hold a tighter rein on him, or you'll be running into this kind of problem every day." Luke watched her stiffen at the words, and the concern in her pretty eyes gave way to consternation.

“It isn’t easy to watch an active two-year-old every second, Mr.—”

“Fontaine. Luke Fontaine.”

“Hossy.” The little boy held out his stuffed horse to Luke.

“That’s his word for horse,” the woman told Luke. “As you can see, there isn’t a bashful or fearful bone in Nathan’s body.”

Luke could see the deep hurt and anger in her eyes, figured she was holding her temper in check for the boy’s sake. He ignored the child’s gesture, at the moment more interested in how a woman with such deep red hair and luscious green eyes could have given birth to a blond-headed, blue-eyed child like the one she was holding, but then that wasn’t his business. Her husband must be the one with the blond hair. Luke wondered where he was. “You might try tying a rope around the kid like you mentioned earlier.” He rubbed at his leg a moment longer, then stood up.

“Well, thank you for the sage advice,” she told him coolly.

Luke studied her full lips, the porcelain look to her skin, her slender waist. He could not help noticing how nicely she filled out the bodice of her flowered cotton dress, a dress, he took note, that was suited to the journey ahead, but still had a more elegant look than what the other women were wearing. Her hair was nicely done up, in such a pile of curls that he was sure it must hang to her waist when she let it down. “I’m sorry,” he told her. “I haven’t had the best morning.”

The woman sighed. “No, neither have I.” She struggled to hang on to her son, who was wiggling to get down again.

“Here, let me hold him for a minute,” Luke said. “I’ll walk you back to your own camp.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she started to protest, but the husky boy was obviously more than she could handle when he had the desire to climb out of her arms. “Oh dear,” she said, reluctantly handing him over.

Luke gathered the child into his arms, surprised at how easily he came to him when he had never met him before. “Well, Nathan, you’ve got to quit giving your mother such troubles.”

“Hossy,” Nathan said again, touching the horse’s nose to Luke’s. The gesture broke the strain between Luke and the boy’s mother, and they both smiled.

"I am Lettie MacBride Dougan," she told Luke then.

Luke nodded, secretly touched when little Nathan put his head down on his shoulder. Over the last year he had given a lot of thought to what it might be like to have a son of his own. He'd certainly give him more love than he had ever known from his own father. "Glad to meet you, Mrs. Dougan."

She looked past him then at his mules. "You...you're traveling alone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, then, I insist, Mr. Fontaine, that you let me and my family thank you for saving Nathan by joining our campfire tonight for supper. This first day's journey is bound to be difficult. The least we can do is save you the trouble of having to fix your own supper tonight. That is our lead wagon over there," she said, pointing to a wagon with a pole, tied with a red cloth, sticking up above it. "We marked it that way so that if Nathan runs off, he could spot our lead wagon easily and find us again. Actually, we have three wagons. My father is both a farmer and a merchant. He is taking a load of supplies along to start his own store when we reach Denver."

"Denver? You aren't going all the way to California?"

"No. We and some of the others will stay with the train to the fork of the North and South Platte rivers. Then we'll follow the South Platte to Denver. Father feels there is a great deal of potential there for a businessman, much more than in California and Oregon, which are already so heavily settled."

"Could be," Luke answered. "And how does your husband feel?"

He noticed the woman's face redden as though for a moment she felt some kind of shame.

"Nathan's father is dead," she answered. "Killed in a border raid."

Luke watched her eyes, and what he saw there was not the look of a grieving widow. Something was amiss. "I'm sorry," he told her.

"Yes, well, that's part of the reason we're starting someplace new," she told him. "Father's store was burned, as was our home and farm. We're from up in the St. Joseph area."

Nathan reached out for his mother, and Luke handed him over. "I'm from St. Louis, headed for Montana," he told her.

“Montana! Oh, isn’t it terribly wild and lawless there?”

Luke grinned. “A good place for a man to make his claim and set his own rules.”

“Yes, I suppose.” In spite of her initial irritation with the man for telling her how to handle her own son, Lettie could not help noticing how handsome he was. *Never have I seen such beautiful blue eyes on a man before*, she thought. Immediately she felt the crimson coming to her cheeks, along with another burst of shame. What right did she have to be attracted to any man, and what man would want her, if he knew the truth about her? “I had better get back to our wagons. My parents are in town getting more supplies, and my brother and sister are off wandering. When everyone is back I will explain what you did, and I know they will insist on cooking you a decent supper tonight. Please say you will come.”

To be able to look at you again? Luke thought. “I’ll be glad to join you.”

“Good. Look for us when we make camp tonight, then, Mr. Fontaine.”

Luke nodded, then reached out and gave little Nathan’s chubby hand a squeeze. “See you tonight, then.”

He turned and walked back to his mules, and Lettie noticed he limped badly. She thought again how handsome he was, but such thoughts only brought an ache to her heart, for in her situation, it was useless to allow special feelings for any man. There simply could never be another man in her life. She did not want one, and no decent man would ever want her.

She turned away. As she headed back to her own camp she kissed Nathan’s cheek. Some people thought she should hate her son, but he was an innocent child, a child she had grown to love far more than she had thought possible in the beginning. No child should be blamed for a horror over which he had no control, a horror caused by a bloody, useless war. Nathan was never going to know the truth about his father, and leaving Missouri was the only way to make sure of it.



“Fontaine. What kind of a name is that? French?”

Luke lit the thin cigar Henry MacBride had given him. Both

men sat near the campfire, and all around them other campfires were lit and families settled in for supper and sleep. Lettie and her mother, Katie, and her fourteen-year-old sister, Louise, cleaned up dishes, pots, and pans. It was obvious to Luke that the family had money because of their dress and mannerism, and they had a Negro woman along with them to help with the work. She was a very large woman, her hair almost completely gray. She seemed to get along well with the family, hummed softly while she worked.

Beside Henry sat Lettie's nineteen-year-old brother, James. "My father is a descendent of some of the first French trappers who traded in furs," Luke answered MacBride. "His father and grandfather roamed the Rockies and places even farther west before most people ever gave a thought to settling out there. They became wealthy traders, then merchants. My father inherited all of it, owns a big mercantile emporium in St. Louis, even some warehouses and several riverboats for carrying supplies."

Henry arched his eyebrows, which were as red as his hair. It was obvious Lettie had inherited features from both parents. It was her father who had the green eyes that on her were so exotically beautiful, but she had her mother's lustrous, darker red hair and milky smooth skin. James was the image of his father in every way, but Louise was the opposite of her sister, with bright red hair and brown eyes. Henry spoke with a heavy accent. "Came over here because of the potato famine," he had already explained. "Didn't have much choice, seeing as how everybody was starving to death in Ireland. I miss my homeland, though. Me and Katie both."

"Well, it sounds like you've walked away from a pretty good thing," Henry was telling him now. The man took a couple of puffs on his own cigar. "Wouldn't you stand to inherit some of that wealth? What takes you to a place as wild and dangerous as Montana?"

Lettie kept her ears open as she dried a dish. She wanted to know the answer herself. She could not seem to shake off her attraction to Luke Fontaine, and for some reason, Nathan took to him as though he had known the man since birth. Even now he played near Luke, kept trying to give him his "hossy," which he normally never let anyone else hold.

There was a loneliness about Luke Fontaine that stirred something in her she had never felt before, certainly not for any man. She told herself she must be careful of those feelings, for they could lead nowhere.

“I decided I wanted to make it on my own,” Luke answered her father.

Lettie detected a deep hurt, even anger, in the way he spoke the words.

“There are a few things my father and I don’t see eye to eye on,” he continued. “I figured I was better off getting out.” He puffed his own cigar and glanced at her. Lettie quickly turned away, embarrassed he had caught her staring. “Besides, I guess I’m just not the kind to walk in someone else’s footsteps and do the expected. That’s for my older brother. He’ll take everything over someday. Me, I enjoy the adventure.”

Henry chuckled. “Sounds like a typical young man. You shouldn’t turn your back on what’s rightfully yours, though, Luke. There will come a time when you’ll wish you had that inheritance. I’d think it could be a big help to you if you’re going to be building something for yourself in Montana. Me, I wish I had had something to fall back on when we lost everything back in Ireland. Of course, that was before Lettie was born. We’ve been in this country a long time now. Trouble is, disaster came to greet us again.”

Luke watched smoke curl up from the end of his cigar. “Your daughter said something about a raid earlier today. I gather you are victims of the border wars. Lettie said her husband was killed in a raid.” He noticed the man exchange a warning look with his daughter.

Lettie suddenly put down her dishcloth. She came over to pick up little Nathan. “It’s time for bed, son.” She glanced at Luke. “Thank you again for what you did today. If there is anything you need, please don’t hesitate to tell us.”

Luke looked her over, wishing she wasn’t so damn pretty. He regretted barking at her earlier that day about not watching her son properly. It had to be difficult raising a son with no father. He warned himself not to care about her. Where he was headed was no place for a woman and a child.

“Fact is,” he answered, “the wagon master has already asked

me to do some of the hunting for the others, seeing as how I don't have anyone to look after. Maybe when I'm doing that your brother can take care of my mules. I'll see that the family gets some extra meat for it."

"Well, we'd sure appreciate it!" Henry told him.

"Yes. Thank you."

Luke nodded to Lettie, and for a moment their gaze lingered before she turned and quickly left. She climbed into the family's lead wagon. Luke looked after her, wondering about the change he had sensed as soon as he had mentioned the raid.

"We'll be glad to look after your mules when necessary," Henry told him then, interrupting his thoughts. "We'll have to tie them to one of the wagons, seeing as how me and James and my wife have our hands full with our own oxen." The man sighed. "I hate putting my family to this hard life, but it's only until we get where we're going. I gave them a damn good life in Missouri. I've become a wealthy man, Mr. Fontaine. Up in St. Joseph we had a fine big home and farm, as well as a couple of businesses in town. We even owned slaves, and I gave them all their freedom before we left. I figured the time is going to come when they'll all be free anyway. Be that as it may, I made a good life for my family back there, and I don't ever intend for any of them to suffer the way Katie and I suffered back in Ireland. I could see that was beginning to happen again, only for different reasons, so we left."

"I'm sorry about Lettie's husband. Did you lose everything?"

Henry stared at the fire thoughtfully. "They burned us out. That was all before Lettie even had her baby. We stuck it out because she was carrying. We tried to make it work for a couple more years. Finally, after a few more raids we decided to leave. I've got enough money to set us up good wherever we go."

Luke nodded. "That's good." So, Lettie's husband was killed before she even had the child. That meant he'd been dead for a good two and a half years. It also meant she must have been about fifteen when she married, practically a child. It seemed odd that the MacBrides had married off a daughter that young.

"Tell me something, Luke," Henry asked. "How old are you? Twenty-six, maybe?"

"Twenty-eight. Why?"

Henry studied him, then shrugged. “Just wondering how a big, strong young man like yourself managed to stay out of the war.”

Luke braced himself. This might be the end of his short friendship with Henry MacBride and family. He rested his elbows on his knees. “I didn’t,” he answered. “That’s why I was hurting pretty bad earlier when that horse kicked me. He got me on my right calf. I was shot and wounded in that same spot. I’d been in the war for about a year when it happened—almost lost the lower part of my leg. After that I got discharged and gladly left. There isn’t anything uglier than what’s going on in the South right now. Take your border raids and multiply that several hundred times, and you’ve got an idea what the war is like. It’s bloody and senseless, and I have no desire to get involved in it again. I only joined up the first time to get away from my father. I had a lot of things to think about, wasn’t sure what to do with my life.”

Henry puffed on the cigar. “What side did you fight on?”

Luke gazed intently into the man’s eyes for a moment. “Union,” he answered. He waited for Henry MacBride to send him packing. MacBride obviously hated the Kansas jayhawkers who had raided his farm and killed his son-in-law. He had even owned slaves. Surely he was proslavery and pro-South. It was well known that Irish immigrants had settled throughout the South.

Henry held his eyes. “You ever do any raiding on innocent people?”

“No, sir. I was in the regular army. The only people I raised a weapon against were Confederate soldiers in full battle.”

Henry nodded. “Nothing wrong with that. I know it’s an ugly war, and everybody has an opinion of who’s right and who’s wrong. It’s when citizens appoint themselves as the law and decide to fight the battle their own way that it’s wrong.” He looked over at Sadie, who was singing as she scrubbed some pans. “I was good to my slaves, but I didn’t really feel slavery was quite right. I felt better about all of it after I gave them their freedom. Sadie chose to stay with us. She’s been with the family so long she’d be heartbroken if I made her go...and homeless. I pay her now.” He looked Luke over. “Out here there is no

room for feelings about the war, Luke. Out here we're all the same, and we all need each other. I don't hold it against you that you were a Union man. You're not wearing a uniform now. You're just someone who saved my grandson's life today, and I thank you for that. You're welcome to come back and join our campfire whenever you feel like it."

"Thank you," Luke answered. He rose. "I expect I'd better turn in. Tomorrow is going to be another long day."

"That it is, boy, that it is." Henry reached out and shook his hand. "We're glad to share our campfire with you any time."

Luke glanced at the wagon where Lettie had so quickly disappeared, wondering why such a beautiful young woman had not found another husband by now. She'd turn any man's head, and her little boy would be easy to love. He bid another good-night to Henry MacBride and left. Whatever Lettie's situation was, it wasn't his affair. His only concern was to get himself to Montana.

Inside her wagon, Lettie lay beside her son, stroking his white-blond hair, part of her longing to be a natural woman, another part of her terrified at the thought. Why had meeting Luke Fontaine stirred these surprising desires in her? It was foolish, wrong; more than that, it was hopeless. She studied Nathan by the light of a lantern that hung nearby, kept lit so the boy wouldn't be afraid of the dark. His big brown eyes blinked open, and he smiled softly at her before his eyelids fluttered closed again.

Lettie supposed she should have thanked Luke Fontaine again, but decided it was best not to encourage any man. It saved a lot of hurt later on. Weariness from the long, hard day finally overtook her, and her own eyes drifted closed. But as it so often did, the horror flashed into her mind...the raider's leering face...his white-blond hair...and the ugly eagerness in his brown eyes. She started awake, looked down at Nathan to make sure she had not disturbed him.

She gently pulled away from him, knowing that the only way to clear her head was to stand up for a few minutes. When she moved to the back of the wagon she saw her sister Louise climbing into the second wagon which she shared with her mother. Her father and brother slept in the third wagon. She

wondered how Luke would sleep tonight. On the cold, hard ground, no doubt. Did he have a tent or anything for shelter?

After a time she lay back down. There was another twenty miles to cover tomorrow, most of it on foot. She would be carrying Nathan part of the way, trading the boy off with her brother and father. She closed her eyes again, this time turning her thoughts to Luke, how he had rescued Nathan, the way he had looked...how he had watched her tonight.