

HEART *of the* ROCKIES ☆ I ☆

# *A Heart Divided*

A NOVEL



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# Prologue

Colorado Rockies, late July 1851

A giant, blood red moon rose in the blackened sky. The air lay still, warm, and heavy with moisture from an impending storm. Cattle in the stock pen bawled loudly, milling about until dust blanketed them in churning, choking clouds. Yet, as sweltering as the eve was, the hand clasping the revolver shook with an apprehensive chill.

Swathed in shadow, the man dropped the empty liquor bottle and dug into his trouser pocket, extracting a rumpled handkerchief. “It’s time for that reckoning, Wainwright!” he snarled as he mopped his sweaty brow. “Time to settle up, you lowlife, lying varmint. Whatever comes of this night, you’ve only got yourself to blame.”

He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket, checked his revolver one more time, then stepped from the shelter of the barn. Staggering toward the small cabin, he fumbled as he tried once, then twice, before successfully cocking the gun.

“Wainwright!” the man croaked out the word, his voice

raw and whiskey belligerent. “Get your sorry hide out here. You’re not getting my ranch without a fight.”

For a long moment, all was quiet. Then an oil lamp flared brightly within the dwelling and the sound of muffled voices spilled from the open windows. Footsteps echoed on the pine plank floors.

The front door swung open. Light streamed out onto the hard-packed dirt to puddle before the little house.

A man’s tall frame filled the doorway. One hand gripped a rifle. Behind him the form of a woman, heavy with child, moved.

“Who is it, Edmund?” she murmured anxiously. “What does he mean? Was this his ranch?”

“Not now, Mary,” her husband growled, never taking his gaze off the disheveled man standing but fifteen feet away. Gently, he pushed her back inside. “Let me handle this.”

“It’s over, Caldwell!” Edmund Wainwright then cried. “I won your place fair and square. Now, it’s mine. Get on with your life, and let me and my family get on with ours.”

“It’ll never be over!” Jacob Caldwell bellowed back. “We’re ruined, me and my wife, and you tell me to get on with my life? Why, you blackhearted, cheating card shark! It won’t be over until one of us is dead. Now, come on out. Fight me like a man.”

“You’re drunk. I won’t fight a drunk.”

Caldwell’s trigger finger jerked convulsively. A shot cracked through the air, the sound echoing down the valley and out to the mountains as the bullet spent itself just shy of the porch.

“Come on out, you lily-livered coward, or I’m coming in to get you!”

“Have it your way, then, you whiskey-besotted fool,” Edmund Wainwright roared. “If you’re so set—”

A movement at the far edge of the cabin caught Caldwell’s

eye. He swung toward it, stumbling. Inadvertently, his finger once more squeezed the trigger.

Again, the sound of gunfire exploded in the air. This time, though, it was followed quickly by a child's scream.

"Nicholas!"

Wainwright lunged from the doorway, his rifle clattering onto the porch as it fell from his grasp. "He's shot you," he cried as he ran to where his son now lay crumpled on the ground. "That crazy fool's gone and shot you!"

In stunned disbelief, Jacob Caldwell lurched back. He stared at the sight of his enemy kneeling now to gather up the bleeding child into his arms. Unbidden, a crazy impulse to fire pierced his drunken fog.

*Do it. You've got nothing to lose. If the boy dies . . .*

Lightning slashed across the sky. A woman's scream tore through the air, the onrushing crack of thunder adding its own spine-chilling emphasis. Caldwell's hand froze in its upward swing.

He stood there for what seemed a lifetime, then shoved the revolver into the back of his trousers. "As I said before, Wainwright," he muttered as he staggered into the blackness from which he'd first appeared. "Whatever comes of this night, you've only got yourself to blame."

Rain began to fall in loud, splattering plops. Caldwell paid them no heed. As he hurried away, though, another cry rose on the wind that had swiftly followed in the wake of the storm.

A woman's cry . . . one that suddenly changed from agonized sorrow to a keening, physical anguish.

# 1

## Colorado Rockies, early September 1878

“I can’t, Papa. I just can’t!”

Sarah Caldwell turned a pleading gaze to the unkempt man squatting beside her, hiding in the shadow of the Wainwright bunkhouse. For an instant, their glances locked.

He stared back, a hard, implacable look in his eyes. The faint ember of hope that her father might relent, even at this late a moment in their unlawful plan, died.

She looked to where her two older brothers stood behind them. Caleb’s and Noah’s features mirrored the same ruthless determination. Sarah inwardly sighed.

*They’ll follow Papa in this, just as they go along with most every other fool scheme he cooks up.*

“Please, Papa,” she said, trying one more time. “I-I’ve changed my mind. Stealing’s wrong no matter how much we need the money. And now you want me to do . . . do this? I can’t. I just can’t.”

His gnarled hand jerked her to him. “Oh yes you can, girl!” His lips hovered inches from her, and his low-pitched voice grated against Sarah’s ears like gravel over a washboard. “It couldn’t get any better than this. Wainwright and most of his men are gone on the fall roundup, and there can’t be more than a servant or two in the main house. And the only

able-bodied man left on the ranch is that hand over yonder. I didn't bargain on him being so close by, but what's done is done. Besides, we'll be back in no time."

"But Papa, that wasn't the plan—"

Her father's grip tightened. "Sarah, no more, do you hear me? We've all got to play our part. And there's nothing so hard in doing what comes natural. Do you want Danny to die, just because you won't dirty your purty little hands?"

At the reminder of her seven-year-old brother, Sarah's gut clenched. With a strength that surprised even her, she twisted free of her father's grasp.

A grudge, twenty-seven years of soul-rotting enmity, had brought them to this. Though she and her brothers hadn't even been born when it had all begun, the consequences dogged their lives as relentlessly as they did her father's. It didn't matter that she wanted no part of it. They were family. And family stuck together through thick and thin.

She expelled a rueful breath. "Have it your way then, Papa. I'll do it, but *only* because of Danny. I'll do it this once, but never, *ever*, again."

"Don't make such a fuss, little sister," Caleb hissed over her shoulder. "If you play your cards right, all that hand'll have time for is a few kisses before we're back. That's *all* we expect of you."

Noah laid a hand on her shoulder. "It'll work out just fine, Sarah. You'll see."

As her father stood, she shot her oldest brother a grateful look. Twenty-one-year-old Noah had always been her best friend and confidante. He'd also never been all that enamored of their sire's often harebrained schemes. In this particular case, though, like Sarah, Noah felt compelled to carry out the robbery for their youngest brother's sake.

The three men pulled out flour sacks with makeshift eye

hole openings and tugged them over their heads. Then, though well aware the ranch was minimally staffed, they checked their revolvers one last time before making their stealthy way toward the large white-frame house. Once her father and brothers were safely around the back, Sarah stepped from the protection of the bunkhouse and strode toward the barn. As she walked, she licked her lips—a nervous gesture that never failed to soothe her jangled nerves. Never failed, that is, until today.

*How am I going to charm that man?* she wondered, fixing her sun-squinted gaze on the back of the tall, shirtless figure standing in the back of a wagon unloading hay. He was powerfully built, the play of muscle and sinew along his arms and shoulders moving in rippling, effortless precision. The hot Indian summer sun beat down on him, and sweat gleamed on his body.

Sarah swallowed in distaste. *What if he does try to kiss me?* At the consideration, her gut churned unpleasantly. *I've only kissed a boy for the first time last month, and that just because it was my eighteenth birthday. How am I ever going to make a grown man think I know what I'm doing?*

She toyed with the top button of her white cotton blouse. Heat flared to her cheeks. Bosoms. She was going to have to show her bosoms.

But all men liked bosoms. That much was evident from watching the town's crib girls whenever she thought Papa wasn't looking. Yet would bosoms be enough in this case? She wouldn't know unless she tried.

With a small sigh, Sarah loosened the first three buttons. A trickle of perspiration slid between her still modestly exposed cleavage. She bit back a tormented groan.

*Mama, forgive me,* she thought, her face flaming fire hot. *I know you raised me better than this, but you're not here anymore to talk sense into Papa, and what else can I do?*



She halted, jerking her embarrassed gaze down to her long skirt. The coarse brown cloth stirred in the weak breeze. *Maybe a show of limbs might help too. The crib girls certainly seem to think it does.*

After a passing hesitation, Sarah grabbed the skirt's front hem and tucked it into her waistband. A shabby petticoat and hint of slim legs appeared.

A movement just then caught her eye. The ranch hand jumped down from the wagon and disappeared from view. Her pulse quickened. *What if he's gone up to the main house? Papa and my brothers are sure to be inside by now.*

She had no choice; she had to stop him. Sarah broke into a run, the movement of her bare feet on the drought-parched earth stirring little eddies of dust.

*Do it for Danny . . . for Danny . . .*

The man was standing beside a horse trough on the side of the barn, pouring water over himself, his strong, brown hands gripping a bucket high over his head. His face and upper body glistened as the water slid down his naked chest and long, sinewy arms. Sarah stopped in her tracks.

A dark brow arched as he caught sight of her. "And what can I do for you, little lady?" the cowboy asked, lowering the bucket back to the ground.

His voice, deep and resonant, rasped across the sensitive ends of Sarah's tightly strung nerves. She choked back an inane giggle, forcing a slow—and what she fervently hoped was an enticing—smile to her lips.

"A better question is, what can I do for you?" Sarah purred, using a phrase she'd heard the crib girls use.

He stared at her as she once more moved toward him, his jet black eyes never missing a thing from the seductive sway of her hips to the unbuttoned blouse and revealing display of petticoat. And, as his appreciative gaze raked her, it was

the hardest thing Sarah had ever done not only to endure his avid perusal but to keep on walking forward.

Finally, she halted a few steps from him. With what she fancied was a provocative toss of her long, pale hair, Sarah settled her hands on her hips. “Want to get to know me better, cowboy?”

He moved toward her until they stood but a hairsbreadth apart. Sarah’s eyes widened. Despite the day’s heat, a chill swept through her.

*What do I do now?*

He was tall, towering over her small form. At the realization of his inherent size and strength, a primitive, feminine fear washed over her. How would she hold his interest long enough to draw attention from Papa and her brothers?

An impulse to lift a prayer to God filled her. Mama had always taught her to turn to the Lord in times of need. But Mama had been dead five years now, and Sarah hadn’t prayed, much less set foot in a church, ever since. Besides, asking advice on how to tempt a man didn’t seem a particularly appropriate request of the Almighty.

*Do what comes natural . . .*

With trembling hands, she touched the bronzed form before her, sliding her fingers up a hard, muscled arm to trail consideringly across the water-damp hair on his chest. “Well, cowboy?”

A low chuckle rumbling in his throat, he pulled her to him. “Who are you, anyway? And is this just some game, one girl daring the other to try out her feminine wiles?”

For an instant, Sarah’s mind went blank. *Whatever is he talking about? Think. Think fast or all will be lost.*

“And what if it *is* a dare?” she asked, sudden inspiration striking her. Her arms lifted to encircle his neck. “Either way, I win.”



His eyes narrowed. *How old is she? Seventeen? Eighteen?* And where had she come from? Was she some new hire to help with the household chores? If so, it was strange that he hadn't noticed her arrival.

She had pretty green eyes, delectable lips, and a pert, charming nose in a face framed by a thick mass of corn-silk-colored hair. Far too attractive to be playing games with grown men.

A girl with her kind of looks was a powder keg on a ranch like this, lacking only a fool cowboy or two to set off an explosion. Better he nipped her fledgling seductress role in the bud. She needed a lesson—and badly—before someone less scrupulous took advantage.

With a wicked grin, his hands settled on the girl's waist, and he pulled her even more tightly to him.

“Well, if that's what you think, there's a lot you can do for me, little lady,” he growled, his voice deep velvet and suggestive. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

The color faded from the girl's face. For a long moment, he thought he had finally frightened her into backing off. Then thick, brown lashes fluttered prettily against her cheeks.

“Anything you like, cowboy. I only want to make you happy.”

*Just as I thought.* The man's mouth quirked in amusement. *She's an innocent playing the woman.*

He pulled the girl into his arms and lowered his head toward her. “Then, for starters, how about a kiss?”



Before Sarah could protest, his mouth slanted over hers. The shock of his warm, firm lips, so sure, so knowing, took her breath away. She gasped, her hands slipping from his neck to wedge between them. Jerking back against the solid,

stubborn barrier of his arms, her hands balled into fists and she began to pound at the flesh so close to hers.

Compared to this bold assault, her birthday kiss had been little more than a chaste if awkward brushing of lips. Alarm filled her, the knowledge she had achieved her goal paling beneath the startlingly tantalizing onslaught of his mouth. Both repelled and strangely attracted by the conflicting emotions his kiss stirred within her, Sarah gradually ceased her pointless flailing. A moan, female and entreating, rose in her throat.

At her response, the man hesitated, then pulled back.

Sarah stared up at him, startled. *Why did he stop? Has he guessed my inexperience and found me lacking?*

Shame flooded her, a confused mix of humiliation for the passion she'd felt and for the ignominious failure of her quest. Caught up in the chaotic swell of emotions, she could do little more than stand there and watch as the cowboy's fingers found the buttons of her blouse and began to fasten them.

"It's time to end this lesson," he said, his voice gone low and hoarse, "before I forget why I started it."

A jumble of responses sprang to Sarah's lips, then died as she looked up and saw his frowning features. Panic filled her.

*I need to keep him distracted. But what else can I do? Oh, hurry, Papa! Hurry—*

Almost as if in response to her silent plea, swift, stealthy footsteps, then a movement over the cowboy's shoulder, caught Sarah's attention. She froze.

Not so the tall man standing before her. He reacted instantly, shoving her aside then whirling around. As swiftly as he moved, though, he was still too late.

The wooden water bucket met him, slamming into the side of his head with enough force to knock most men out. He sank to his knees.

Immediately, Sarah's two brothers were on him, striking

at his head and shoulders as the cowboy struggled to rise. He half-turned, throwing off Noah, but Caleb grabbed a handful of dirt and tossed it into his face. Choking, his fists desperately rubbing at his eyes, the cowboy stumbled back to his knees.

Once more, Noah was on him, pinning the cowboy's arms behind him then jerking him to his feet. Caleb, now joined by their father, lost not a moment. They began to pummel him.

In helpless horror, Sarah watched as the blows struck the cowboy's face and sank deep into his belly. She heard the tormented grunts with each well-placed fist, shuddering at the sight of the blood-smeared mouth that had so lately caressed hers. Watched, heard, and stood there . . . until finally even the ties of family loyalty could no longer silence her protests.

"Stop it, Papa!" she screamed, flinging herself between the cowboy's battered form and her father's upraised arm. "You're killing him!"

Chest heaving, he hesitated, his fist halting in midair. "Do you know who this is? It's Cord Wainwright. Get out of the way, girl!"

She held her ground. "It doesn't matter, Papa." Her voice quavered as she fought the sickening churning in her gut. "Y-you've beaten him enough. We came here to rob the Wainwrights, not commit murder. Let him go."

"She's right, Papa," Noah interjected just then. "We got what we came for. Let's head on out."

The seconds ticked by as Jacob Caldwell battled his mindless rage. Finally, the red haze seemed to clear. "Just as well," he said. "Tie him up, boys."

Sarah's brothers roughly bound then dragged the limp form over to lie beside the hay wagon. The limp form of a man she now realized was not a common ranch hand but the Wainwright son born the very night her father had come

to this ranch and demanded it back from the man he hated above all others.

Talk was, though, that Cord Wainwright had been gone from these parts for a long while, and that was why, Sarah suddenly realized, she hadn't recognized him. But that really didn't matter just now. What mattered was the uneasy premonition that, as much as she might wish it otherwise, this encounter wouldn't be their last. And that, next time, she might not come out of it half as well.

Jacob coughed hard, the sound deep and wet, then turned to his daughter. "Are you all right, girl?" he asked, pulling off his flour sack disguise. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"N-no, Papa." Sarah wrenched her gaze from Cord Wainwright to her pale, sweaty-faced father. "I-I'm fine."

"Well, then, good. You did a good job. I'm proud of you." He gestured toward a bulging flour sack lying by the barn door. "Like Noah said. We got what we came for, and more. Now it's time to hightail it out of here. Come on."

Reluctantly, Sarah allowed herself to be led away. She couldn't help, though, but shoot a last glance over her shoulder. At the sight, her heart twisted and she immediately regretted her action.

The handsome younger son of Edmund Wainwright lay there in the dirt, bound and bleeding, an errant breeze stirring bits of hay about his motionless form.



Two weeks later, Cord Wainwright slammed his black Stetson onto his head and strode from Ashton's Bank and Trust. He'd had about all he could take of the family business! Not only had Spencer Womack, their ranch foreman, been on his back for the past week about his suspicions that roaming bands of Utes were responsible for the occasional rustling of

their cattle, but the bank president had just presented Cord with an ultimatum to pay off the loan for the prize bull his father had insisted they buy three months ago. An ultimatum that now, thanks to the recent robbery, the Wainwrights had no money with which to comply.

Long, ground-eating strides carried Cord to where his horse was tethered. In one lithe motion he mounted—and quickly remembered his bruised side when a sharp pain shot through him. He settled into the saddle with a wince, then gingerly reined the animal around and down Main Street.

He had argued with his father until he was blue in the face not to buy that bull. The demand to put the money Cord had given him in the bank had also fallen on deaf ears. Edmund Wainwright was as stubbornly old-fashioned as they came, and trusted no one's judgment but his own. Unfortunately, that overpriced bull had yet to prove himself. And an old tin box hidden behind a bookcase in the study had, in retrospect, served as a poor substitute for an ironclad bank vault.

The bright green-and-blue-painted sign of McPherson's Mercantile came into view up ahead on the corner of Main and River Street. Cord halted his horse there and dismounted, flinging the reins around the hitching post. As he stepped onto the boardwalk fronting the big building, a man, his arms loaded with packages, barreled from the general store and straight into Cord.

Shoved backward into the hitching post, he bounced hard off the wooden rail. Cord straightened and staggered up onto the boardwalk, clutching his side. Barely controlling the impulse to hit the man, he instead shot him a furious look.

"I-I'm sorry, mister," the fellow stammered, quickly sidling away. "By golly, it was an accident, after all. You don't have to look at me like you want to beat in my face."

Cord stared long and hard at the man's rapidly retreating

form. Gradually, his anger cooled, and remorse filled him. He *had* overreacted, been on the verge of striking out over something as inconsequential as a careless blunder.

He shook his head. What was the matter with him? He'd long ago learned the importance of maintaining rigid control over his temper, respecting the fearsome power he had come to possess in his fists. Maybe the robbery—and the events surrounding it—was eating at him more than he cared to admit. This definitely didn't seem to be his day.

The coolness of McPherson's interior was a welcome relief from the unseasonable heat of early autumn. He removed his Stetson and, still rubbing his side, scanned the high-ceilinged room. The store's tall shelves were packed with household wares, a fine selection of foodstuffs, and bolts of colorful cloth, its floor space jammed with large pickle, molasses, vinegar, and cracker barrels, bushel baskets of dried beans, and other various and sundry items. The proprietor and sole employee, Dougal McPherson, however, was nowhere to be found.

Cord walked over and laid his Stetson on the merchandise counter. "Dougal, you old coot, where in the blazes are you?" he shouted, irritation tingeing his voice.

Rustling sounds emanated from the back room. The slight, spry form of an elderly man hurried out. A thatch of snow-white hair and ruddy features set off a large nose in a kindly face. Bright blue eyes, touched with humor, met his.

"So, is this what 'tis come to, when a lad such as ye starts bawling at his elders? Well, I won't have it!" the old Scotsman roared in mock indignation. He shook his bony fist at Cord. "Hie yerself from my store afore there's fisticuffs, and ye come out the loser."

"Hold on now." Immediately, all the pent-up tension drained from Cord. He laughed, raising his hands as if to



defend himself from the irate little storekeeper. "You're not tricking me into a rematch. That last trouncing was enough to last me for a lifetime."

"Och, and 'tis good to see all that fancy law schooling hasn't dimmed yer memory," Dougal muttered. "Ye might be a tad brawnier than ye were at sixteen, but the years haven't dimmed my boxing skills a wit."

He paused, a reluctant grin tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Now, tell me. What brought ye here? I haven't seen ye in over two weeks."

Cord sighed. "Bad news, I'm afraid. I need to start a credit account for any supplies we might need. And it'll likely take a while to pay it off too."

"I figured it'd come to that, once word got around ye'd been robbed. 'Tis not a problem. Pay me when ye can."

Cord strode over to stare out the front window, shoving his hands deep into his denim pockets. "Actually, it is a problem. My problem. The longer it takes to pay off the debts my father has run up," he muttered, "the longer I have to put my life on hold. With my two stepsisters gone now from the ranch, you know as well as I the only reason I even bothered to come home. And it was never solely to help out my father."

"Yer father's made a fine mess of things, and no mistake," Dougal said. "There's no easy way to make money, and those poor investments of his prove the truth of that. But dinna go so hard on him, lad. Meet him halfway, and 'tis sure ye'll come to an understanding."

"Oh, I understand him just fine," Cord replied with a bitter laugh. "He's hated me since the day I was born. All I want is to get the ranch squared away, then head back to New York where I belong. I can't put my life or the law practice on hold forever. My partners have already been more than patient."

“Ye won’t reconsider hanging up yer shingle in Ashton then?”

“There’s nothing here for me anymore. You know that. I just need to get that money back.” Cord ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “There’s no more where that came from. I’ve sunk everything I had into trying to save the ranch.”

“Och, dinna fear, lad. Sheriff Cooper will find those robbers. Everyone knows ’twas the Caldwell clan.”

“Maybe. But Gabe hasn’t had much luck so far. Seems the Caldwells, when they put their minds to it, can be a mite hard to track down. And it’s not like I got a good look at any of the men. They were all wearing flour sacks over their heads. The girl’s the only one I’d know if I saw her. She’s the key to the mystery.”

As he scanned the scene outside, he rubbed the still-tender spot on the side of his head where the bucket had slammed into it. What had she said when they’d been beating him, just before he passed out?

*“Stop it, Papa . . . you’re killing him . . .”*

*Papa . . .*

The girl had never been a new employee. And her accomplices had been her family. Dougal was likely right. Who had greater reason to hate them than the Caldwells?

Though he’d been gone for nearly eleven years, the animosity between the two families was just as evident upon his return as when he’d left. Too many unexplained things had been happening—cut barbed-wire fencing, burned line shacks, not to mention missing cattle. Occasional bands of Utes notwithstanding, odds were some of the problems also had to be the Caldwells’ doing.

*Yes, Cord resolved, it has to be the Caldwells who robbed the ranch. But I need proof. And, if I’m ever to get back to New York, what with my father and most of the hands gone*

*on the roundup for another week, it's up to me to take matters into my own hands.*

“Well, I dinna know any other lass in town with hair like ye described,” Dougal was saying. “’Tis the bonny Sarah Caldwell, or I’m—”

“Dougal, come here!”

At the urgency in Cord’s voice, the old Scot hurried quickly to his side. “What is it? What do ye see?”

“That boy over there.” Cord pointed toward a shabbily dressed lad crossing the street. “Who is he?”

Dougal studied him briefly, then shrugged. “Seems a mite familiar, but I can’t be certain from this angle. Some miner’s bairn, no doubt. New folk arrive every day. ’Tis hard keeping track of all the—”

Cord wheeled about and strode back to the counter. Grabbing up his Stetson, he shoved it on his head as he headed for the door.

“I don’t care what you say, McPherson,” he said, excitement threading his voice. “I’d know that face and form anywhere. It’s that girl—the one who helped rob us!”