

The Inheritance
by Tamera Alexander

Chapter 1

Copper Creek, Colorado, Rocky Mountains

Tuesday, June 5, 1877

McKenna Ashford climbed down from the wagon, holding firm to the belief that she'd made the right decision in coming West—as if her brother's behavior back in Missouri had given her a choice. She surveyed the not-so-quaint-looking mountain town of Copper Creek and found it to be rougher than she'd envisioned from her cousin's descriptions in her letters. The town was more rustic with its clapboard buildings, some slightly leaning and arthritic in appearance, their cracked windows staring out like dazed, bloodshot eyes on unsuspecting passersby. But the mountains . . .

Tilting back her head, McKenna traced a visual path across the craggy range that stood sentinel over Copper Creek. And lingering on their highest snowcapped peaks, feeling both awed and humbled, she knew Janie was right—a person couldn't see these mountains and not be changed.

“So this is it? *This* is what we left home for?”

McKenna stared up at Robert, still seated on the wagon bench, and read familiar disdain in her brother's smirk. Only fourteen—nine years her junior—Robert stood a head taller than her and sported muscles most men would be proud to claim. “All I'm asking, Robert, is that you take the wagon and go on to Vince and Janie's so they'll know we've arrived.” Exhausted and hungry, she worked to keep the frustration from her tone, and failed. Again. “It's only a half mile or so from town.” She gestured to the

envelope on the bench seat beside him, knowing the letter's contents by heart. "The directions are in her letter. I'll get a horse from the livery and meet you there shortly."

Robert didn't move. "I don't see why I can't go on with you to the livery." He gave the letter a cursory glance. "I've never even met these people."

"Yes, you have. I've told you before, they knew you when—" She caught herself, realizing it was no use, considering the stubborn set of his jaw. "You don't remember Vince and Janie because you were too young. But they'll remember you. Though they won't recognize you, that's for sure." Patience teetering, she managed a smile. "Just tell them who you are. They're expecting us."

"I still don't see why I can't just—"

"Robert!" She exhaled. "Please . . . simply do as I've asked. I'll work out the details with the livery owner and join you shortly."

He narrowed his eyes. Using more force than necessary, he released the brake on the wagon. "You're probably right, sis. It's best you go on without me. We both know *you're* the one he's hired anyway. Whether he knows it yet or not." He gave the reins a hard whip.

The wagon jolted forward and McKenna jumped back, the wheel narrowly missing her boot. Her patience threadbare, she watched him go. How could she love that boy so much and still want to throttle him?

Seeing Robert's natural ability in the way he managed the heavy rig, she felt a twinge of envy. They'd purchased the horses and wagon in Denver, and she'd wondered how he would manage over the steep mountain passes. But there wasn't a rig Robert couldn't handle—or build, for that matter. Saddlery equipment and supplies they'd brought from home weighed down the wagon bed—tools of their father's trade she hadn't been able to part with. No matter how destitute their father's untimely passing had left them. In so many ways . . .

Wagons cluttered the main thoroughfare, but Robert maneuvered his way around them without a hitch. Lengthy hours spent alone with him on the two-week journey from Missouri to Colorado had been made even more so by his repeated sullen sighs. Constant reminders of his not wanting to be here. As if she could forget.

She held her breath as he cut close corners on two freighters—twice. Intentionally, no doubt, judging by the smart tip of his hat to the drivers as he passed. Each driver threw him a dark look, and both were large enough to break Robert in two. Not an easy task with her brother's broad build.

Her eyes narrowed. Part of her prayed Robert wouldn't do anything to further provoke the men, while the rest of her wondered if a good thrashing might do him some good. Her own hand at disciplining him had never been a strong one, but then again she hadn't sought the role of mother that God had thrust upon her at such a young age. *Please don't let him do here what he did back home.* This move was their chance to start over again, and they wouldn't get another one. She couldn't afford for this attempt at a new beginning to fail.

She arched her back and stretched the taut muscles in her shoulders and neck, weary from the day's travel from Denver. A surprisingly cool breeze swept down from the snow-drifted mountains, granting reprieve from the afternoon heat.

The air here—she took a deep breath and her lungs tingled—tasted like God had breathed it fresh from heaven's storehouse that very morning. Surely this was a sign.

Since stepping off the train in Denver, she'd felt a sense of homecoming. It sounded silly, even to her, and she'd be hard-pressed to explain it—coming home to a place she'd never been before. Not one usually given to romanticisms, she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps this move to Copper Creek was by God's design after all. Perhaps this was the inheritance He'd been storing up for her. The inheritance her father had failed to provide.

Grasping her skirt with one hand, she made for the boardwalk, working to avoid numerous deposits left from animals who had passed that way. People occupying the planked walkway and those milling about the entry to the mercantile nodded when their eyes met hers. She returned their smiles when offered. Maybe she and Robert really could start over here.

Maybe Copper Creek could become home. A place where no one knew about their past.

Her spirits lightening, she stepped inside the mercantile. She'd meant to purchase a little something for Janie's five-year-old daughter, Emma, before now, but hadn't. Just a small gift, a token of appreciation for Emma's willingness to share her room—only until McKenna arranged for another place for her and Robert to live. She thought of Emma's drawings tucked safely inside her satchel. Sweetly penciled renditions of a cabin and barn that Janie had included with a recent letter. She could hardly wait to meet the little artist.

McKenna met an older couple coming down the main aisle of the mercantile and scooted aside to allow them room to pass. Catching a good-natured wink that the elderly gentleman tossed in her direction, she couldn't miss the attentiveness he showered on the woman beside him. The way he held her steady at the elbow, his other hand cradling the small of her back. The way he anticipated the placement of her feet as she started down the boardwalk stairs. So caring. So gentle.

Watching them, McKenna found herself smiling. How long had they been together? What manner of time and experience had fostered such closeness? A closeness so inherently personal, so endearing, it was nearly tangible. The questions nudged at a memory better left buried, and her smile faded.

There had been someone special in her life. Once. Someone she'd thought she might grow old with. But Michael's love of honor and justice ended up taking him away from her. Honor was an attractive thing in a man. Until it crowded you out of his heart.

Unsettled by the memories, McKenna swallowed against the tightness in her throat and pulled her attention back to the task at hand.

After browsing for several moments, she finally settled on the perfect gift for Emma—a wooden toy consisting of a little cup with a ball attached by a string. She'd had something similar when she was about Emma's age and had loved it. She paid for the item while eyeing a package of what looked to be homemade cookies on the counter. From where she stood, she smelled the sugar and spice. Her favorite.

"Would you like some cookies, ma'am? I bake them myself. Fresh every day." McKenna looked up at the woman behind the counter and then discreetly counted the dwindling coins in her change purse. "I'd better not today, thank you. It's so close to dinner. But they do smell delicious."

The compliment earned her a smile, but McKenna felt her cheeks burning all the same, sensing the woman knew her real reason for refusing. Thanking her, McKenna quickly exited the store, consoling her hunger with the knowledge that Janie would have dinner warming on the stove and a pan of her delicious buttermilk biscuits in the oven. It had been seven years, but McKenna still remembered the taste of Janie's biscuits, along with the honey butter she served alongside.

Realizing she'd failed to ask the woman in the mercantile where the livery was, McKenna approached a gentleman on the street and made an inquiry.

"Which livery you want, ma'am? We got us three."

Three? She hoped Janie's advice about which livery to contact had been sound. She needed the livery that would provide the most business for her and Robert. After the cost of traveling here, and then purchasing the horses and wagon, their funds were nearly depleted. "I'm referring to the livery owned by a Mr. Casey Trenton."

He pointed. "Trenton's place is on the other side of town, toward the mining camps." The man—short of stature but with a wealth of heft about his middle to compensate—

pursed his lips and eyed her up and down with improper leisure. "You just get off the stage, miss?"

McKenna caught the hint of onions on his breath and something untoward in his manner. "If you'll excuse me." She moved past him down the uneven walkway, ignoring his repeated attempts to pursue the conversation.

She headed in the direction he'd indicated, glancing behind her to make sure he wasn't following. He was, but only with his eyes. She took the nearest side street. As a rule, for all their boast and swagger, men were an easily read gender consisting of too few chapters and all too common a subject.

It felt good to walk. She lengthened her stride, eager to conduct her business with Mr. Trenton, the livery owner, and find her way out to Vince and Janie's before sunset. Which might be sooner than she expected with Copper Creek nestled so close between the mountains. "*A supply depot to nearby mining towns*" is what Janie had called Copper Creek, which McKenna hoped boded well for the use of both her and Robert's talents.

She passed structures made of hand-hewn pine, closely spaced, as though still huddled together from the harsh winter this territory was known for. And yet, already, a liking for this place was growing inside her. She preferred it to the big-city feel of St. Joseph that she and Robert had left behind.

It would be good to see Janie again after all these years, Vince too. Janie was a cousin by blood, but more of a sister in heart. The sister McKenna had always wanted. Janie could well have had their second baby by now. She was due any day. The last letter McKenna had received had been dated two months ago, but spring was a busy time on a new ranch, not to mention when one had a five-year-old running underfoot. How well she remembered Robert at that age.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." A young woman smiled as she passed on the boardwalk, a little boy situated on one hip and a slightly older one clutching her skirt, trailing behind.

“Good day.” McKenna grinned seeing the older boy’s short legs pumping to keep up, his smile saying he enjoyed the challenge. Robert had beamed that very same way as a toddler too, holding tight to her skirt as they’d gone to the mercantile together. She sighed. All that seemed like forever ago now. So much had changed.

She lifted her gaze to where the sun crept steadily toward the snowcapped peaks, lustering the mountains a burnished gold. Some days, admittedly, she’d wondered if she’d only been grasping at the last proverbial straw in coming to Copper Creek. But she’d prayed long and hard about it, investing many sleepless nights until finally . . . she’d felt a nudge inside. So it was gratifying to feel this deepening certainty settle inside her. Finally, a well-made decision. She peered into shop windows as she passed—a women’s clothier and a cobbler’s shop, a bakery where the door stood propped open. The aroma of freshly baked bread and something sweet drifted through the portal and caused her pace to slow. Her stomach tightened in hunger. But she consoled herself again with thoughts of Janie waiting dinner on her, and continued on. Cooking was a talent she possessed in fair amount, but baking was not. As a young boy, Robert had let her know that her leftover biscuits made excellent fodder for his slingshot. And he’d been right. But a woman couldn’t be good at everything.

Best to learn early on what your strengths were and make the most of them. She’d been forced to learn her strengths early enough, and her weaknesses too, which were plenty.

She reached the end of the boardwalk and stepped down to the street. Some people might say she’d been forced to learn them at too young an age, but at least she’d—

Pounding hooves portended the rider only seconds before he was upon her.

McKenna dove from his path—narrowly escaping the horse’s hooves—and hit the boardwalk stairs with a thud. Searing pain shot through her shoulder and down into her left hand. The man *had* to have seen her, yet he’d made no effort to stop!

Blinking, disoriented, she finally managed to stand—only to hear the answering pursuit.