



A Daughter's Legacy

By Virginia Smith

To receive her inheritance and make peace with her late mother, Kelli Jackson must abide by the woman's will. Even though it means working as a zookeeper for six months -- with animals that terrify her. How can she possibly explain her fears -- and her past -- to her handsome boss, Jason Andover? The glimpses of kindness -- and painful secrets -- she sees in his eyes have her sharing everything. But then she makes a startling discovery--one that may tear them apart forever.

“Kelli and Jason's budding romance and her discoveries about a mother she spent little time with make this a wonderful story of love in its many forms.” – Susan Mobley, *Romantic Times* (4 1/2 Stars)

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Of all the ways she could have chosen to spend a Thursday morning, attending a stranger's memorial service wasn't at the top of Kelli Jackson's list.

Especially when that stranger was her own mother.

Kelli faced the front of the open-air amphitheater clasping a completely dry tissue in her lap and trying to ignore the curious glances being cast her way. Apparently everybody wanted to get a glimpse of the outsider who claimed to be Lillian Mitchell's daughter. As people had filed toward their seats among the rows of semi-circular wooden benches in the moments before the service began, more than one puzzled whisper reached her ears.

“I never knew Lillian had any family. Did you?”

“Can't say as I did. Looks like her, though. Wonder why Lil never talked about her.”

Kelli kept her face schooled in the detached, professional mask she wore when preparing a tax return for a new client. Wouldn't do to show dismay at the humiliating affirmation that her mother hadn't even cared enough to mention to those she worked with that she'd given birth to a

daughter twenty-six years before. As person after person stepped up to the podium on the center of the stage to recall incidents from Lillian's life, Kelli's gaze kept stealing to the table where the polished wooden box holding her mother's ashes rested, a single vase of flowers beside it.

The deep roar of a lion exploded in the distance, and a wave of gooseflesh rose along Kelli's bare arms as the primeval cry reverberated in the air around her. The sound echoed across the years from childhood nightmares she'd thought safely forgotten long ago.

What am I doing here, Lord? This is no place for me.

The man standing behind the podium paused in his tribute and raised his head to listen until the roar died away. His smile swept the crowded amphitheater.

"Apparently Samson would like to speak a few words on Lillian's behalf. He always was an attention hog."

The crowd's chuckle held an indulgent tone. Obviously Samson was a favorite among the mourners. Kelli shifted on the rough wooden bench.

"Actually, it's fitting that Samson be included in this service to honor Lillian. She dedicated her life to making sure that he and the rest of the animals here at Cougar Bay Zoological Park receive nothing but excellent care and the highest quality of life."

Of course she did. Kelli's lips tightened, despite her efforts to keep her expression impassive. *She cared more for those zoo animals than she did her own child.*

Which was one reason she wanted to get this ordeal over with as quickly as possible and get out of here. Back home in Denver life could return to normal. She could go to work and lose herself in the comfort of her clients' finances. All the questions she encountered there were easy ones, with concrete answers, like, "Can I deduct the clown I hired for my daughter's birthday since I invited my boss to the party?" ("Uh, no, Mr. Farmer, I'm sorry but that's not a legitimate deduction.")

"The first time I laid eyes on Lil, she was cleaning out the chimp house." The man eulogizing Lillian—Kelli couldn't think of her as *Mom*—smiled, and from her vantage point on the first row Kelli recognized genuine affection in his face. Tall and fit, with sun-kissed brown hair curling around the collar of the tan shirt with the zoo's logo over the breast pocket. Nice looking,

probably only a few years older than Kelli. What was he to Lillian? An employee, no doubt, since Lillian ran everything here at the zoo.

“I shouted through the bars that I was there to interview for the keeper position. She let me in, handed me a hose, and told me to show her my stuff.” An appealing grin twisted his lips. “I must have looked hesitant, because she barked, “You’re not afraid of a little poop, are you?””

Everyone around Kelli laughed. She couldn’t hold back a smile herself. Judging from the voice she’d heard over the phone during their stilted, twice-yearly conversations, the guy had Lillian’s gravelly, no-nonsense bark down pat. He must have known her pretty well, then. Kelli cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the sparsely filled benches. No doubt these people knew Lillian better than her own daughter. How sad was that?

“I didn’t bother to point out that she was wearing rubber boots, while I was in a suit and had just polished my shoes. Knowing Lil as I do now, she wouldn’t have cared. It’s a good thing I took the hose and got to work.” His head dropped forward, and when he continued his voice sounded choked.

“Landing this job six years ago was the best thing that ever happened to me. It gave me the chance to work with someone whose devotion to animals went far beyond anyone I’d ever met, or likely will again. Lil changed my outlook on my job, and on my life. I’ll never forget her.”

A hushed murmur of agreement rose from the mourners as he left the stage to return to his seat on the front row, a few feet away from Kelli. She watched him covertly as the minister stepped up to the podium for his final remarks. The guy sat with his head drooping forward, hands dangling between his knees. When he brushed tears from his eyes, Kelli experienced a twinge of self-reproach.

What’s wrong with me, God? My mother is dead. Why can’t I grieve, like this guy?

But Kelli’s soul felt leaden, numb, as the minister led them in a closing prayer. How could she grieve the loss of her mother today, when the real loss had taken place years before?

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