



# Things You Won't Say: A Novel

By Sarah Pekkanen

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In this timely and provocative novel, internationally bestselling author Sarah Pekkanen takes us inside a family in crisis and a marriage on the brink after a tragic shooting.

*How far would you go to save your family?*

Every morning, as her husband Mike straps on his SIG Sauer and pulls on his heavy Magnum boots, Jamie Anderson tenses up. Then comes the call she has always dreaded: There's been a shooting at police headquarters. Mike isn't hurt, but his long-time partner is grievously injured. As weeks pass and her husband's insomnia and disconnectedness mount, Jamie realizes he is an invisible casualty of the attack. Then the phone rings again. Another shooting—but this time Mike has pulled the trigger.

But the shooting does more than just alter Jamie's world. It's about to change everything for two other women. Christie Simmons, Mike's flamboyant ex, sees the tragedy as an opportunity for a second chance with Mike. And Jamie's younger sister, Lou, must face her own losses to help the big sister who raised her. As the press descends and public cries of police brutality swell, Jamie tries desperately to hold together her family, no matter what it takes.

In her characteristic exploration of true-to-life relationships, Sarah Pekkanen has written a complex, compelling, and openhearted novel—her best yet.

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## **Things You Won't Say: A Novel** By Sarah Pekkanen Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### **Praise for THINGS YOU WON'T SAY:**

"Gripping reading" (People)

"A standout among standouts." (Glamour on Things You Won't Say)

"A gripping story of racial profiling, PTSD, and the threads that hold people together. You'll forget it's fiction." (Marie Claire on THINGS YOU WON'T SAY)

"Fantastic and realistic." (Examiner.com)

"Pekkanen tackles a timely topic." (Booklist)

"Pekkanen reliably builds strong, interesting characters." (Kirkus Reviews)

#### **Praise for Sarah Pekkanen:**

"Sarah Pekkanen writes with wit and warmth and a deep understanding of the way women—mothers, daughters, sisters, friends—make a place for themselves in the world." (Jennifer Weiner #1 New York Times bestselling author)

"Ultimately, Pekkanen shows that relationships of any kind take work, expression of love, and the willingness to take risks in order to save them." (New York Journal of Books)

"Smart and soulful, Pekkanen explores the place where self and sisterhood intersect." (Redbook)

"Pekkanen's wry voice and engaging characters keeps things fresh." (People)

"Pekkanen offers a conversational writing style and a knack for making readers care about her characters." (Washington Post)

"Sarah Pekkanen is one of my favorite authors of women's fiction." (Lisa Scottoline New York Times bestselling author)

"Internationally best-selling Pekkanen writes novels that offer thoughtful examinations of how the past shapes adult relationships and the differences between men and women." (Booklist)

"Fresh, appealing...the story is at turns funny and poignant." (Booklist)

"Many of the interwoven story lines are finely wrought, and the book as a whole is compelling." (Booklist)

"Will grip readers. 5 stars." (Examiner.com)

"Pekkanen weaves a satisfying tale of the nuances of marriage and duty and how small kindnesses can reestablish the bonds of family after an estrangement." (People)

"Once again, Pekkanen delivers relatable characters and story lines, showcasing the strength and perseverance required to make relationships work. This is an entertaining and emotional read for fans of contemporary women's fiction" (Library Journal)

"Internationally best-selling Pekkanen writes novels that offer thoughtful examinations of how the past shapes adult relationships and the differences between men and women. Many of the interwoven story lines are finely wrought, and the book as a whole is compelling." (Booklist)

"Pekkanen sparkles with her latest, a touching tale of college friends whose happily ever afters aren't as perfect as they might have once expected. Lovably flawed, realistic characters and a fast-paced story make this a deeply enjoyable page-turner." (Publishers Weekly (starred review))

"It's just the book to banish the last of your winter blues." (People, 3.5 out of 4 stars)

"Reading this BFF-getaway-gone-wrong novel is like vacay without leaving the couch." (Glamour)

"Pekkanen is deft at finding each woman's voice, displaying all sides of eventual conflicts. Her strong narrative pulls the reader steadily through the book, with tension mounting as the weather worsens...a solid entry in the "women's fiction" genre." (Library Journal)

"A perfect beach read, it's also a perfect weekend book. Get out a few chocolates and a glass of wine and prepare to make some new friends." (Examiner.com)

"Sarah Pekkanen's latest celebrates the healing power of female friendship for three very different young women sharing a New York City apartment. At turns bittersweet, laugh-out-loud funny, and painfully real, you'll wish you could move in with these girls." (Jodi Picoult #1 New York Times bestselling author)

"Pekkanen offers a conversational writing style and a knack for making readers care about her characters... a refreshing look at the importance of female friendship." (Washington Post)

"Within a few pages, you'll find yourself emotionally invested." (Entertainment Weekly)

"A pleasure." (People)

"A compelling and satisfying read...highly recommended." (Library Journal (starred review))

"Heartbreaking and familiar." (People)

"Sarah Pekkanen is one of my favorite authors of women's fiction, and I was engrossed in *CATCHING AIR* from start to finish." (Lisa Scottoline New York Times bestselling author)

"Original and engaging." (Emily Giffin New York Times bestselling author)

#### About the Author

Sarah Pekkanen is the internationally bestselling author of *The Opposite of Me*, *Skipping a Beat*, *These Girls*, *The Best of Us*, *Catching Air*, and *Things You Won't Say*. Her work has been published in *People*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA TODAY*, among other publications. She lives with her family in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

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Things You Won't Say

## Chapter One

AS SHE APPROACHED THE traffic light, Jamie Anderson prayed it would stay green. She pushed harder on the gas, edging the speedometer's needle as high as she dared—which wasn't very high, because she was a cop's wife and police headquarters was a dozen yards away. Just when she thought she'd make it through the intersection, a slow-moving Toyota cut in front of her, forcing her to hit her brakes. The stoplight blinked yellow, then red.

Jamie held her breath. Don't look, she warned herself, even as she felt her gaze being yanked to the right, toward the section of sidewalk that had recently been cordoned off with crime-scene tape. The sidewalk had been scrubbed clean, but she wondered if the dark stains still showed up close.

Her three-year-old daughter's high voice piped up from the backseat: "Pizza?"

"What? No, not today," Jamie said. She gripped the steering wheel tightly. Why was the light taking so long?

"Pizza, please!" Eloise said, her little-girl lisp turning the l into a w.

"Maybe later," Jamie said.

Her husband, Mike, would be returning to this exact spot tomorrow, wearing his dark blue uniform and Magnum boots and heavy patrolman's belt. For the first time, though, his silver badge would be crossed by a black ribbon.

A blaring horn jolted Jamie and she pressed the gas pedal again. Being here was wrenching for her. How much worse would it be for Mike to return to the spot where his longtime partner, Ritchie, and a young rookie officer had been shot two weeks ago by a lunatic with a grudge against cops?

But Mike would never quit. Early in their relationship, when they'd been trading stories about growing up, he'd told her that during recess at his elementary school, the boys had split up into two groups: the good guys and the bad guys. The other kids switched between characters, but never Mike. Even back then, he'd wanted to be the one to round up the criminals. It was why he'd turned down a chance at a promotion that would mean more desk work years ago. He loved patrolling the streets, talking to citizens, giving high fives to little kids. Keeping everyone in his little strip of the city safe.

"I hungry! I want pizza!" Eloise's whining had crossed into wailing now.

"Okay, okay." Jamie sighed, knowing she was probably violating a half dozen parenting rules but not particularly caring. She had a little extra time before she needed to pick up her eight-year-old, Sam, and six-year-old, Emily, at their elementary school anyway.

She put on her signal to turn left and stifled a yawn. Mike had endured another nightmare last night, thrashing around before he sat bolt upright and yelled something incoherent, awakening with all the sudden violence of a thunderclap. He'd been sweating and trembling, and she'd gotten up to bring him a glass of water when he said he didn't feel like talking. Neither of them had been able to fall back asleep. Now it was barely two-thirty, and she was exhausted, her feet hot and sore from racing around after Eloise at the

playground all morning. She had a trunkful of groceries to unpack before driving Sam to soccer practice, then there would be homework to supervise, lunch boxes to clean out and refill, a dishwasher to unload, the living room to reassemble before the tornado of kids struck again . . . plus her sister, Lou, had left two messages today. Something would have to give, and it might as well be a home-cooked dinner. She'd pick up a couple of pizzas now, give the kids a slice each for an after-school snack, and reheat the rest tonight.

Belatedly realizing she'd achieved victory, Eloise stopped mid-shriek. A future actress, Jamie thought. Or an opera singer, given the notes Eloise hit when she was upset.

Jamie found a parking spot near the entrance of their favorite carryout and unbuckled Eloise from her car seat. She ordered a salad for herself even though she knew she'd end up scarfing a few cheesy pieces from the two large pies she was buying, then she grabbed a Diet Coke from the refrigerated case. She needed caffeine. She needed a housekeeper, a cook, and a part-time driver more, but her budget covered only the soda. She was stretching out her hand to accept her change from the cashier when she heard someone call her name.

She turned around to see a slim woman with chestnut-colored hair who was dressed in black spandex and - expensive-looking running shoes. Jamie had on athletic gear, too, but her outfit was chosen only because all her Old Navy T-shirts and shorts—her warm-weather uniform—were entangled in an overflowing laundry basket.

It took Jamie a moment to place the face: another mom from the elementary school. She should know the woman's name; they'd met at a half dozen holiday performances and field trips through the years.

"Hi!" Jamie said, injecting enthusiasm into her tone to make up for her memory lapse.

"It's so good to see you," the woman said, moving closer and reaching out to grip Jamie's forearm. "How are you?"

The woman was wearing what Jamie had come to think of as a sympathy face: creased forehead, jutting chin, and wide, inquisitive eyes.

"Fine, thanks," Jamie said, pulling her arm away and ignoring the woman's unspoken questions. "Eloise, that's enough napkins. Stop pulling them out, honey."

"It was so terrifying to hear the news," the woman continued. She clutched her chest. "In the middle of the day! I mean, you'd think a police station would be the safest place in the world!"

"Yes, well . . . some people are crazy," Jamie said.

"How is Mike doing?" the woman asked.

"He's good," Jamie said, keeping her tone neutral. No way was she going to reveal any personal information. The details would ricochet around the school via an informal gossip tree before her pizza was even out of the oven.

"Oh," the woman said, seeming a little disappointed. "I mean, he was right there, wasn't he? It could've been him!"

Enough. Jamie smiled tightly and reached for Eloise's hand. "Come on, honey, we need to get Sam and Emily."

"My pizza!" Eloise protested, dropping the napkins on the floor.

"We're coming back for it," Jamie said. She left the napkins, grabbed a peppermint from the jar by the cash register to appease her daughter, and rushed them both to the car, feeling the woman's stare on her back.

Yes, Mike had been right there! Was that what the awful woman wanted, for Jamie to describe the scene she couldn't stop thinking about?

Her cell phone ringing as she was driving to pick up the kids from school—just as she was now. Her hand reaching to hit the speakerphone button and turn down the radio. Mike's voice gasping out terrible words: A man with a hunting rifle lying in wait outside headquarters. Two officers down. A rookie dead on the sidewalk. And Mike's partner and best friend, Ritchie, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound.

Jamie's shaking hand took two tries to fit the key into the ignition.

"Ritchie was right ahead of me," Mike had kept repeating. "I didn't see the gun! The sun—it hit my eyes . . . Oh, God, I didn't see the gun in time . . ."

The deranged man had been taken down by another officer who was leaving the same 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. shift. Later, all the newspapers had reported that in the pocket of the killer's camouflage pants was a rambling note professing his hatred of police.

And now Mike hated himself.

Maybe he should talk to somebody, Jamie thought as she drove toward the school, knowing her husband would never do it. A police counselor had offered therapy sessions, and even suggested Mike start taking antidepressants right after the shooting.

"Crazy pills," Mike had scoffed, rolling his dark eyes. Instead he'd tried to lose himself in punishing runs and endless biceps curls and push-ups. He changed the oil in the minivan and added new insulation in the attic. He visited Ritchie in the hospital's ICU nearly every day. He drove Jamie and the kids to bring casseroles and salads to Ritchie's wife, Sandy, and their twins, but while the women talked and the kids played, he mowed the lawn and trimmed the hedges. No matter how hard he tried to exhaust himself, though, the nightmares persisted, and with every passing day, Jamie felt as if her husband was withdrawing a bit more, an invisible casualty of the shooting.

Maybe she needed to talk to somebody, Jamie thought.

A housekeeper, a cook, a driver, and a therapist. She sighed. Who could afford any of it?

She pulled into the school pickup line and waited for Sam and Emily to emerge from the red-brick building. Tonight her teenage stepson, Henry, would be staying with them, too. Jamie adored Henry, but she hoped Mike's old girlfriend, Christie, would stay in her car rather than come to the door during the exchange of her son, especially since Jamie's dirty-blond hair was swept up in a messy ponytail and the swipes of mascara she'd put on this morning had long ago sweated off. Henry was the result of a brief fling between Christie

and Mike a couple of years before Jamie met Mike. By the time Christie discovered she was pregnant, she and Mike had been on the verge of breaking up. They'd decided to have the baby anyway, and split custody. Against all odds, it had all worked out. Henry was a terrific boy, kindhearted and smart, and even though drama stuck to Christie like a shadow, everyone was on friendly terms. Friendly enough, anyway. At least most of the time.

"Hi, guys," Jamie said as her older two piled into the minivan. "How was school?"

"Boring," Emily answered, flouncing into her seat with a long-suffering sigh. Six years old going on Katy Perry was how Mike always described her.

"I'm starving," Sam said.

"We're picking up pizza in a minute," Jamie said as she pulled back onto the road. She hoped the nosy woman had left the carryout. She couldn't bear another round of questions, especially not in front of the kids, who'd spent so much time with Ritchie and his family. Sometimes Jamie had teased Mike about wanting to socialize with them on weekends. Didn't the two men see each other enough?

Mike and Ritchie were as close as twin brothers, although they looked nothing alike. Ritchie was tall and thin, with horn-rimmed glasses and a prematurely graying Afro; Mike was short and muscular, with wavy dark brown hair. Each knew how the other took his coffee, what his opinion was on mayo versus mustard, and how he reacted in times of stress or boredom or crisis. They even teased each other about reading the sports page on the john. They'd been teasing moments before the shooting, too.

Mike had been about to walk out the building's heavy glass door. But instead, he'd pulled it open and nudged Ritchie in the shoulder.

"Ladies first," he'd joked.

And Ritchie had stepped onto the sidewalk, into the bright sunlight, just ahead of Mike.

...

It was probably a safe bet that there weren't many people in the world whose dream job included cleaning up elephant dung, Lou reflected as she picked up a shovel and got to work.

But then again, how many people had the chance to walk through the tall metal gates of a zoo in the dawn of a lush summer day, listening to the calls and chatter of the tufted capuchin monkeys, or the bone-shaking roar of a Siberian tiger? Bearing witness as the zoo came alive was a transformative experience, one that became even more meaningful to Lou as she got to know the animals, to recognize their individual sounds and gauge their moods.

"Tabitha ate about a crate of sweet potatoes last night," another keeper called as he hosed down the adjoining pen. The four Asian elephants were out in the yard, rolling around in mud, which was their morning ritual. The early June day promised to be another hot, sticky one, and the mud would protect the mammals' skin—more evidence to Lou that when it came to common sense, elephants trumped humans any day. Take all the women who greased themselves up in search of a perfect tan and then, a few years later, injected chemicals into their faces in an effort to undo the damage. Which was the smarter species?



“I can tell Tabby binged,” Lou said, scooping up the last of the impressive mess. “But she lost fifty pounds last week, so she needs to put a little back on.” Especially since the great mammal was pregnant. Lou always watched her animals closely, but Tabby required extra attention these days.

“Any big plans for the weekend?” the keeper asked.

“Nope,” Lou said. She knew she was supposed to lob back the question, but she let it drop. Lou didn’t like chatting while she was working at the zoo—it interfered with her time with the animals, and small talk felt draining to her. Besides, she had to make enough of it at the coffee shop where she worked part-time as a barista to supplement her salary. She spent her mornings and early afternoons wiping down enclosures and weighing out food and making sure the elephants were happy. She spent three evenings a week wiping down counters and measuring out coffee grounds and making sure her customers were happy. She supposed there was a kind of symmetry to the services she provided.

Lou finished cleaning the pen, rinsing her boots last. They’d still stink badly enough that she’d have to leave them on the balcony of her apartment tonight, she knew from experience. She was immune to the smell, but she’d learned from the looks she’d received when she popped into CVS one day directly after work that not everyone was. Now she kept a spare pair of flip-flops in her car.

She’d been a full-time animal keeper for a few years, but it had been a long road to achieve her dream, inconveniently realized shortly after she’d graduated from college with a degree in accounting. She’d gone to night school to get another degree—this time in zoology—and had started volunteering on the side, knowing practical experience could be a deciding factor when her résumé was in the middle of a tall stack. First she’d worked for a local vet, then the ASPCA, and finally, she’d begun helping at the zoo. She’d given up her accounting job because the hours weren’t compatible with her volunteer work. Turning in her notice made a twenty-pound boulder she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying around drop off her shoulders. Lou wasn’t cut out to sit in a sterile office, willing the clock to hit 6:00 so she could feel alive. She had school loans she wouldn’t be able to repay for a couple of decades, her muscles constantly ached from the hard labor that accompanied her job, and she’d been bitten by a zebra, peed on by a giraffe, and hit on by a horny llama, among other indignities.

She’d never been happier.

Lou leaned on the handle of her shovel, watching as Bailey filled his trunk with water from the pool. Lou preferred the company of animals to just about anyone else’s, except maybe that of her sister, Jamie, and her family. Elephants were gorgeous, complex creatures with rich emotional lives. They cherished their young, communicated in rumbles that could be understood a mile away, and had personality quirks to rival any human’s. Take Bailey—he acted like a tough guy, but he was terrified of squirrels and cowered in a corner while they snacked on his food. Sasha was a scamp who liked to squirt the others with water, and Martha would meticulously mix her meals together, like she was making a salad—a bit of hay, a carrot, a few apple slices. Then there was Lou’s favorite: big, sweet Tabitha, the most utterly lovable creature on the planet. She hoped the baby had Tabby’s temperament. Give that girl a few words of praise and she was in heaven.

In a little while, Lou would let the elephants out to explore the more than five miles of trails that constituted their habitat. Lou knew other keepers loved their elephants just as much as she did, but she couldn’t bear to visit zoos that had inadequate spaces for elephants. The gentle, intelligent creatures needed plenty of room to roam. Here, she could place hay and vegetables in different locations every day, scattering meals throughout the exhibit and hiding the food, so the mammals could forage for it as they did in the wild. There were two pools—one for wading, and a deep one for swimming—and shady areas to rest. But the best spot was the

back-scratching tree. The elephants loved to rub themselves against the low-hanging branches, and Lou could practically hear them sighing in relief.

Lou's cell phone buzzed in her pocket and she dug it out, belatedly realizing she'd smeared traces of elephant poop on her cargo pants. Not the first time; most of her clothes sported faint green and brown stains.

"Sorry to call so early," Jamie said. "But I knew you'd be up. Is it really only seven? I meant to phone you back yesterday but things got crazy. Emily ate too much pizza and had a stomachache, so I was up half the night, and I swear it feels like noon. At least I hope her stomachache was from too much pizza. This is the last week of school before summer break and if she has to miss a day I'm going to cry."

"How much coffee have you had?" Lou asked when Jamie paused for breath.

"Don't ask." Jamie sighed. When she spoke again, Jamie's voice was tremulous. "Mike's going back to work today."

"Is he okay with that?" Lou asked.

"You know Mike," Jamie said. "If he isn't, he'll never let on."

That was true: Mike was hardly the type to engage in long, emotional talks. Sometimes Lou felt like she had more in common with her sister's husband than with her sister. Then again, she'd always felt more comfortable around guys. Maybe her father was the source of that. He'd insisted he didn't miss having a son, but he'd nicknamed his daughters Jamie and Lou. Who did he think he was kidding?

"So what's up with you?" Jamie asked.

"Donny has a new girlfriend," Lou said.

"Hmm," Jamie said. "What's she like?"

"Okay, I guess," Lou said. "I haven't talked to her much. But she seems nice."

"Does it feel weird?" Jamie asked. "I mean, you guys haven't been broken up that long."

"Long enough," Lou said. "I think they're getting serious. They've been together almost every night this week."

"Do you think he's going to ask her to move in?" Jamie asked.

Lou considered the possibility. She didn't love Donny any longer—in retrospect, she wasn't sure if she ever had or if she'd been swept up in his desire for a relationship, like a swimmer in a fast-moving current—but she sure loved renting the extra bedroom in his apartment. It was close enough to the zoo that she could walk here in the mornings. If the new girlfriend moved in, would that mean Lou would need to move out?

"Let me know if you want to find a new place," Jamie was saying. "I could help you look— Oh, honey, let me pour the syrup. No! Okay, fine, you can help. We'll pour it together. Shi— shoot. Can you grab a paper towel? No, not the whole roll, just one."

“Sure,” Lou said. “In all your spare time.” She didn’t think she’d had a conversation with Jamie in the past six years that hadn’t been interrupted by a child. She’d wanted to ask for advice on how to act around the new girlfriend—sometimes it was a little hard for Lou to read the social cues that other people instinctively grasped—but it was clear this wasn’t the time. “Is Sam around? Can I talk to him?”

“Sure, hang on.”

Lou heard heavy breathing a second later. Sam still hadn’t mastered the art of salutations.

“Do you know elephants are the only mammals that can’t jump?” Lou asked.

“What do you call an elephant that never takes a bath?” he responded.

“You got me,” Lou said.

“A smellephant.”

Lou laughed. “Have a good day at school,” she said. “Actually, forget I said that. That was just a stupid adult thing to say.”

“You want me to have a bad day at school?” Sam asked.

Lou adored this kid. “I’ll bring you to the zoo in a few weeks to see the cheetah babies,” she said. “They’re so fuzzy and cute.”

“Really?” Sam asked.

“Pinkie swear,” Lou said. She wished her conversations with Jamie could be like this—light and easy and fun. But Jamie was always fixing things—meals, messes, boo-boos—and sometimes Lou felt as if Jamie was eyeing her as another project. Little sister Lou, unmarried at thirty-one, with a bad haircut (even Lou had to admit it looked deliberately unflattering, but what could she expect when she’d paid \$12.99 for it?) and an extra twenty pounds and a fondness for fart jokes. Maybe she should’ve been born a boy—guys could get away with all that stuff a lot more easily.

Lou supposed it wasn’t Jamie’s fault, though. Their mother had died of a staph infection when Jamie was fifteen and Lou was twelve, and Jamie had stepped into the role of maternal figure, cooking meals and explaining what it would be like when Lou got her period and teaching Lou how to shave her legs (a practice Lou stopped a few years later. Why bother?).

It was strange, Lou thought as she began rinsing off the shovel she’d used to clean Tabby’s enclosure. She had lots of memories of being with Jamie while growing up but virtually none of her mother. Once, when Lou had been leaving work, she’d passed a group of tourists who were viewing the small mammal exhibit. Without realizing it, Lou had stopped and edged closer to one of the women. That perfume, she’d thought. The floral scent had tugged at the edges of Lou’s consciousness, making her feel as if there was something she vitally needed, something just beyond her reach. Had her mother worn the same fragrance? She’d wanted to ask the woman the name of the brand so she could buy a bottle and uncork it and try to coax out the memories that had to be lingering in the recesses of her brain, but she hadn’t known how to explain her request. While she was still fumbling for the right words, the woman had taken her two young daughters by their hands and headed off. Lou had stared after her, an ache forming in the center of her chest.

Now Lou began to make notes on the elephants' charts, then set the paperwork back down. Jamie's question hung in the air. Of course Lou couldn't stay with Donny and his new girlfriend. Come to think of it, he'd mentioned the other day that there was a woman in his office who was looking for a roommate. Now she realized he hadn't been making idle conversation. She wondered why he hadn't simply asked her to move out. Had he and his girlfriend been talking about it, hoping she'd take the hint? It was a little embarrassing.

This was why Lou loved kids and animals best. They told you what they thought, in the most direct terms possible. If kids were mad at you, they yelled. If elephants were mad at you, they charged and stomped you to death. Simple and straightforward.

Maybe she should see if another keeper needed a roommate—after all, they couldn't complain about the smell of her boots.

Lou walked over to the barrier that separated keepers from the elephants and pulled a red apple out of her pocket.

"Come, Tabitha," she called, and the elephant lifted her massive head and ambled over. Lou tossed her the apple and watched it disappear. The elephant caught her eye, and Lou held her gaze for a long moment.

Sometimes she wished that she could just live here, where life was less complicated.

•••

Christie Simmons twirled the straw in her strawberry margarita, knowing without raising her eyes that the balding guy across the bar was staring at her. She fought the urge to check the time on her cell phone. Simon was late. Again.

"Excuse me."

Baldie had made his move and now leaned against the bar beside her. He'd been there for only two seconds, and already he was crowding her.

Christie glanced up, putting a question in her eyes.

"Buy you a drink?" he offered.

She deliberately looked back down at her full glass.

"After that one, I mean," he said.

He wore a nice suit—nothing custom-made, but a good-quality pinstripe—and his fingernails were clean. Those things were important to Christie. He took out his wallet and removed a gold AmEx card and waved it at the bartender. "I'll start a tab," he said.

Seven years ago—maybe five, on a good day—Christie would've drawn the eyes of the rowdy, younger guys playing pool in the corner. They would've put down their cue sticks and wandered over, loud and sloppy, flirting artlessly while she threw back her head and laughed, keeping her back perfectly straight so they could admire her curves.

But now she was thirty-seven, technically old enough to be their mother. So instead of being surrounded by muscles and hair flopping into eyes and offers of a slippery nipple shooter, she was left with this: a poseur trying to impress her with the color of his credit card. Which matched the color of his wedding ring.

"I'm meeting someone," Christie said.

Mr. Married leaned in closer. His breath smelled sour, as if he'd been drinking whiskey all day. Maybe he had.

"Well, it doesn't look like he's meeting you," Mr. Married said. His smile didn't reach his small, flinty eyes. "You've been sitting here for half an hour."

She hoped the stab of hurt she felt didn't reveal itself. She didn't want to give him that triumph. She knew this guy's type: She'd flirted with him, dated him, hell, she'd even married him once in a spectacularly bad decision that she'd reversed six months later. He'd never made it to the top tier of his profession, and it rankled him. Maybe he had a decent house, and a 401(k), but every day, he had to answer to someone who held the job he coveted, the lifestyle he'd been denied. His anger and frustration mounted, and he released it in passive-aggressive ways: Pretending he had to work late while his wife waited at home. Loudly joking with the barista who made his four-dollar latte to prove he was a good guy, then deliberately cutting off other drivers in traffic. Oh, yes, Christie knew his type intimately before he'd even spoken a word. In bed he'd be a little rough and a lot selfish.

Christie's cell phone rang, but she made herself wait a few beats before picking it up. She angled herself so Baldie couldn't see her face. If he shifted another step or two forward, they'd be spooning, she thought as she suppressed a shudder.

"Hey, gorgeous." With those words, she knew Simon wasn't going to show up. She'd gotten her hair highlighted—she'd been a little worried it was getting too blond, but her hairdresser had insisted no one could ever be too rich or too blond—and she'd splurged on a bikini wax. She'd applied her makeup carefully, using tricks she'd added to her arsenal over the past few years: a line of white on the inside of each eyelid, to make her eyes appear bigger and brighter, concealer that promised to hide fine lines as well as dark circles, a lip-plumping gloss that stung with the intensity of hot peppers but did seem to make her lips appear fuller. She'd even remade her bed with fresh linens.

"Hi there," she said. She could hear Mr. Married breathing behind her, so she blocked the pique from her voice.

"Something exploded at work," Simon said. "Rain check?"

She wondered if Mr. Married had given his wife the same excuse. But Christie wasn't even a wife. She was a girlfriend, and not a demanding, jealous one, either.

"Sure," she said.

"Love you," Simon told her. It rankled her that he never added the I, but she let it go, like she always did.

She waited until she heard him hang up, then she added, "Oh! I thought you said the bar at the Ritz! Okay, I'll meet you in a few."

She put her phone in her purse and stood up. She didn't meet Mr. Married's eyes; she suspected he'd seen through her charade. She left the bar and entered the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, blinking hard as she assessed herself: long hair styled in beachy waves, tanned skin, false eyelashes applied individually so they looked really natural, and a body that tilted toward lush in all the right places, effectively highlighted in her short black skirt and black tank top. True, her nose was a sharp triangle and her chin was a little weak, but she was still the prettiest woman in the bar, she thought.

She exited the bathroom and stood in the hallway, wondering what to do next. Maybe she'd get a salad in the dining room, even though a woman eating alone seemed pathetic.

"Excuse me."

She whirled around, expecting to see Mr. Married. But it was a different man, one who looked a little older and rougher around the edges. He wore a white button-down shirt and soft-looking tan blazer, cowboy boots, and one of those leather bolo ties with a big sterling silver and turquoise pendant. The outfit didn't quite work here in D.C., unless he'd tied up his horse in the parking lot.

"I was hoping to talk to you about a business proposition," the guy said.

"Are you kidding me?" She felt her heartbeat quicken in fury. "You think I'm a hooker?"

"No, no, not at all," the guy said quickly. His brown eyes were a little watery-looking behind his glasses, and he had the beginnings of a gut. "I think you're a businesswoman. I wanted to talk to you about a job—a real one."

The guy held up a briefcase. Like him, it had seen better days. There were scuffs around the edges and the metal lock had dulled. "I can explain. I've got all the paperwork here. I'd offer to buy you a drink but I saw how you responded when the last guy did that."

"A job," Christie repeated. "Are you for real?"

The guy nodded vigorously. "It pays well and it isn't illegal or unethical. And you'd be doing a service for womankind."

He seemed sincere. Christie could usually sniff out a creep a mile away, but this guy didn't exude weird vibes.

She couldn't help blurting: "Why me?"

Later, when she found out what he wanted her to do, she'd think about his answer and wonder if it was the nicest compliment she'd ever received or a degrading insult.

"Because you're absolutely perfect for it," he said.

## **Users Review**

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