

**LUNCH**

**BREAK**

READY FOR COUPLES THERAPY?

**LIZA ANDREWS**

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# 1

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MORGAN MET THE woman, who introduced herself as “Helena,” in a phone app that promoted lunch-hour sex between married individuals. The experience was supposed to be superficial. To create an account, one needed a nickname, a full-body photo in a bathing suit or underwear, and their gender preference. Not another word.

This was May of 2021, roughly a year since the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the world and rewritten all the rules. Relationships were no different. After months of fear, financial uncertainties, and lockdown, marriages had cracked foundations. Despite the chances of contagion, a considerable number of married people were willing to chase the lustful sex they no longer found at home, or the jolt of risk that would ignite their spirits.

*Sanctuary* was a perfect name for this app that offered adventure with likeminded people who had no intention of breaking up anyone’s home. Even the letter “S” in the fancy

logo was a serpent eating an apple, suggesting an Eden where the forbidden fruit was finally allowed.

Morgan had flirted with the app for days before summoning the courage to create her profile. She uploaded a photo in a black bikini and applied the filter the app provided to conceal everyone's faces.

The screen turned black before the golden logo appeared with the messages *Own Your Pleasure. Safe & Discreet*. The parade of brief ads that followed was a collection of faceless men and women displaying their physical attributes. It was like picking a dance partner at a masked ball. If their bodies appealed to you, you could request a match. Your target would then check your ad and decide whether to chat. The app urged its members to take COVID tests before meeting and never see the same person again.

Morgan found very few married lesbians willing to cheat on their wives and felt both proud of the LGBTQ community and critical of her own character. No one was her type. Either not attractive in the photos or dumb during the texting. Not worth the risk.

Three weeks later, this Helena requested a match, and when they texted, Helena said she was straight and desperately wanting to meet an experienced lesbian. The “desperately wanting” and “experienced” parts appealed to Morgan's old vanities.

As a single woman, she ranked among the best lays in town. Sexy, self-assured, and yes, very experienced. She would spend several nights a week devoting herself to the art of giving pleasure. A fierce admirer of the female body, she knew how to touch a woman, providing delicious foreplay and subtle torture before pushing her to the edge.

In those days, which now seemed part of another life, her orgasms were easy and frequent, kindled by the ecstasy in

those beautiful faces and the sounds of their lovemaking. More than sex, Morgan missed the vibrant lover she had once been.

She was sitting in her separate bedroom, across the hall from her wife's, when Helena's text came in.

Wanna meet tomorrow?

Morgan's chest was a battlefield for two powerful armies: the thrill of excitement and the bitterness of guilt. She could see Jane from the half-open door reading in bed. Morgan looked back at the phone, the green dot indicating that Helena was online, waiting.

Her thumbs hovering above the keyboard, Morgan tried to make a decision. By typing a mere *yes*, she could be finding a way to remain in that marriage or ruining any hope of reconnecting with the love of her life.

Jane looked up and when their eyes met, Morgan tried to find any traces of warmth and understanding. Any indications that Jane felt empathy for her loneliness. Her wife went back to her book after an impersonal nod, without the hint of a smile.

Their date was at 1:00 p.m. on a cloudy Monday. Matches were not supposed to know each other's last names. The few hotels now open had security protocols and requested documentation, so Helena suggested they meet at a friend's apartment downtown.

Morgan was in a cab when the phone vibrated in her hand.

I'm here and yes, 191 Mott Street.

The building number was a bad joke and Morgan had previously shot Helena a text to confirm it. Those three digits had crossed her path too often: 9-11 happening in her first trip to

New York; 1-19, her wedding day; and now, the frequent calls to 9-1-1. It felt like the universe was urging her to back off and this was one more sign that things could go south.

Morgan was opening her mouth to tell the driver to change course when Jane's face appeared in her mind. Normally, these would be flashbacks of the wonderful woman she had fallen in love with. Their first kiss on a freezing rooftop in New York. Jane singing on their anniversary. The two of them swimming naked in Cozumel. Moments that had kept Morgan strong and loyal through those tough years. Only now, her mind was too exhausted for the old denial card. All she could picture was Jane's current state. Her cold eyes. The empty vessel. Morgan took a deep breath and laid back on her seat.

She needed to do this at least once.

## 2

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HELENA WAITED BY the window, watching the crowd on the street with an air of detachment. A scientist observing an ant colony. In a way, a scientist was exactly what she had become. Most of her contemporaries were now heads of departments in big hospitals. When had her promising medical career turned into a boring routine of seeing patients and writing prescriptions?

Helena avoided thinking of the obvious answer. Prioritizing her husband's career; accompanying Michael to Boston and Chicago when he got his big breaks had kept her from investing in solid jobs. Returning to New York six months before the pandemic for his new position had been catastrophic. By the time COVID hit, Helena had barely established her local clientele and the private clinic that hired her closed.

She had sent three book proposals to agents in the past couple of years and had just gotten her third rejection. It felt like the apocalypse. Things were shitty with Michael. Shitty at work. Shitty with the entire world. Then, when the vaccine

became available and people began leaving their caves, she got an invitation from an old, powerful enemy.

They had met in that same apartment. The door was unlocked, and Helena walked in without knocking. She found the familiar face masked and dark, sitting against that window.

It had been a while since they last met, and the first words in Helena's mind were *aged* and *heavy*. "Good morning, Dr. Winslet," she said.

Unlike her flat greeting, the reply was forcefully vivacious. "Hello, Helena! How's your lovely husband?"

"If it were up to you, I'm sure he would be dead."

Winslet laughed. "Don't be silly. Alive, Michael can continue to make your life miserable."

"Why am I here?"

"Because I got you a book proposal that will finally fly, as long as I..." Winslet smirked, "supervise you."

"I'm sure you would love that."

"I won't say I wouldn't, but it would be greater for you."

"What's it about?"

"A study involving a new app. I've already pitched it to my literary agent, and it's sold."

"And what's in that for you?"

"No price you can't pay." Winslet smiled. "Can you keep a secret?"

"You know I can."

"Why don't you have a seat?"

That had been months ago, and Helena never regretted the deal. As an expert in human sexuality, she understood the appeal of the new app and the moral questions it raised. The book would be a success.

Winslet had provided that apartment for the dates and



helped Helena hire a staff of fifty escort girls to join the app and secretly record the conversations with their matches.

“How am I going to use data obtained illicitly?” Helena asked Winslet.

“Don’t be naive, darling. Many of our colleagues wrote their books from private recorded files. They change the patients’ names, ages, locations, and have a bunch of case studies without anyone’s permission. You just need to inform a fake source.”

“You are the evil mastermind. Enlighten me.”

“Just for show, you’ll create a post on LinkedIn asking for volunteers to a behaviorist study. Say you will provide the details by private message to those who fit the profile. Print the post as proof that you got your subjects there. Then delete your account, so if you’re sued, no one can look for evidence.”

Since then, Helena’s staff had collected over 1,800 testimonials from Sanctuary users, and Helena herself had slept with a few men who had proved to be smart and talkative for deeper questioning.

Morgan, the lesbian elected to be her female experiment, was only blocks away and would be at her door any minute. Helena pretended not to be nervous.

In the past years, she had eventual threesomes to please her husband, but this would be a different animal. She poured herself a Johnnie Walker, and finding the ice bucket empty, threw it back neat.

The bell rang as the familiar liquor burned down her throat, and Helena’s heart raced with a mix of apprehension and excitement. *I need to make her talk...*

She opened the door with a big smile. “Hi! Come on in!” Helena had already sold herself to Morgan as a curious, straight woman. Why not act girlie and relaxed?

Morgan entered the room and stood nearby, appraising the stranger like she used to in her bachelorette days. *Well-groomed blonde. Great body. Great smile.*

Helena raised her empty glass and cleared her throat, faking discomfort from the whisky. People often confided in those who seemed nonjudgmental, preferably if alcohol or drugs were involved. “What can I get you, Morgan?”

Morgan felt flirtatious and shortened the distance between them. She was taller and looked down at Helena with mischievous brown eyes.

“I’m easy to please, but the drink can wait if you’re not having another one.”

*Interesting,* Helena thought. *Feminine with the energy of a man.*

She dared wrapping her arms around Morgan’s neck. The attractive brunette had straight brown hair and what seemed a constant tan. Lean and slightly muscular; she could live by the beach and be a frequent swimmer.

“I’m new to this,” Helena said, “but I guess lunch-break date means our time is scarce, and we should get straight to the point, right?”

Morgan smiled. “It’s up to you. I enjoy long lunches and since you seemed so curious to try this, I took the afternoon off.”