

7

Claire

*Brooklyn, New York
February 1995*

At its first meeting, the bereavement support group's facilitator asked the eight of them to give their spouse's name and the basic circumstances of the death. Claire being the only "gay" member of the group, Donna could be forgiven for saying "spouses" and not mentioning partners or some other lame euphemism. When Claire's turn came, and she said she'd been together with Jessie twenty-three years, nobody around the circle so much as batted an eye. What a relief that these strangers should be so open minded.

But they must have thought she'd said Jesse, because there was an audible gasp when Claire continued, "She had breast cancer."

Someone whispered, "What?"

Someone else whispered, "Lesbian."

Claire detested labels. Any labels: morning person, night person; intellectual, flirt; flibbertigibbet, leader. Flattering or not, grain of truth or not, she loathed, abhorred and defied them all. The worst was lezzzzbian, with its ugly buzz there

in the middle, like bees zeroing in on the sting, like kamikaze planes homing in for the smashup. The word fogged the truth, which was that Claire had fallen in love with Jessie because she was Jessie, and vice versa.

Had they gone gaga over mere packaging? Absolutely not! They fell for the selves they were deep down—the essential Jessie, the essential Claire. Whatever those selves happened to come wrapped in was very much beside the point. For a long time and fiercely they held that this made them Not Lesbians. Call it their womanhood-as-gift-wrap period.

Problem was, being a woman wasn't some petty happenstance, some tangential peculiarity like a sixth toe, and eventually they had to admit—or rather, to celebrate—that womanliness was integral, essential to the selves they gave each other. Loving Jessie, Claire loved a woman. And vice versa. Well, then, what defined a lesbian? Was it that she loved a woman (which each of them did)—or women (which they did not)? Desired a woman (oh, yes indeed!)—or desired women (emphatically no, never had)? Made love with one woman exclusively—or with women exclusively? So much seemed to hang upon the answers, but no answer definitively came. “Let's not think about it anymore,” Claire said, still despising the word. Call it their ignorance-as-bliss period.

Time went by, and at some moment when they weren't noticing, it ceased to be important to them one way or the other what label they might be stuck with. Lesbian queer gay dykes or not, they just didn't care. They adored each other: what else mattered?

And so Claire stammered on past the whispers at that first meeting, staring into her lap while she told the group about Jessie's second bout with cancer, how Jessie said not to worry, bad things always came in twos in her life. Claire would see, it would be okay. Sure enough, Jessie beat that one, though what a close call it was. Then six months later, having survived two surgeries and a month of radiation and numerous appalling rounds of chemotherapy, Jessie was killed in a car crash by a forty-year-old DWI.

Alan, the lone widower there, asked, "What happened to the DWI?"

Claire drew a finger across her throat. "Killed," she said. "In the smackup."

"Good!"

"You think so?"

"Don't you?"

She swallowed and lowered her eyes to the floor, scuffed green vinyl tiles twelve inches square, black streaks slanting through them. Everything outside had gone silent, awaiting her response. She was supposed to say yes, it was good, the man deserved it, justice was served. Or else no, it wasn't good, his death couldn't bring Jessie back. She thought the old Claire would have said no, although it was hard to remember the old Claire, the one who died that summer day along with Jessie. It was even harder to fathom the woman sitting here now pretending ignorance of the answer boiling in her mouth. Of all things in the world unrecognizable since Jessie's last breath, Claire herself was the most.

At last she raised her eyes to meet the others', and her hands encircled the air. "I'd much rather have strangled the goddamn bastard myself," she snarled, her thumbs pressing into an invisible Adam's apple. The young woman to her left—too young to be a widow, but weren't they all too young, even the white-haired lady with the cane?—that young one blurted out, "You go, girl!" And everyone laughed, all of them, together. Gone were the whispers, the rustling, the politely blank faces, the limp smiles implying some of their best friends were lesbians. Loss was what defined Claire now. Loss defined them all, and loss is the same, no matter what label attached to your gender or politics or sexual history.

Not that loss was a term they all embraced. Alan, for one, protested when Donna asked him how he'd lost his wife. "I lose my keys, I lose my hat. I lose the bills that come in the mail. Sometimes I'm sure I'm losing my mind. But my wife? You're telling me she's just misplaced somewhere, stupid me, and I can't find her?" Eyes stabbing at the facilitator over his

reading glasses. “Lois is dead. She’s not coming back. What can I do about it? Nothing. Where can I go to get it changed? Nowhere.”