

A woman with long, wavy red hair, seen from behind, stands in a cemetery at night. She is wearing a dark blue coat. She is looking towards a large, dark, arched tombstone. In the background, other tombstones are visible, some appearing weathered and partially obscured by mist or fog. Bare tree branches are silhouetted against a dark, cloudy sky.

BEYOND *and* BEGONE



LOIS CLOAREC HART

For my wife, Day,
who also saw the curious headstone.

Beyond and Begone

by Lois Cloarec Hart

The back door creaked open, and Erin looked up from her book with a smile. “I’m in here.”

Mariel bounced into the living room, her ever-present grin in place. “Of course you are. Where else would you be on a beautiful, sunny Sunday, my perfect roommate and bestest buddy?”

The words were said affectionately, but Erin couldn’t repress an inner wince. During the past four years, her self-imposed seclusion had occasioned many discussions between them, but she had made progress over the last several months. *I wish she’d acknowledge that.*

Mariel tossed her overnight bag at the couch, missed her target, and flopped onto the soft cushions with a deep sigh.

“Tired?”

Mariel nodded. “You know how homecoming is in the metropolis of Traversville. Every man and his dog that ever graduated from T-high was back for the weekend.”

“Uh-huh. And anyone of interest in our hometown crowd?”

“Funny you should ask.” Mariel sat up and winked.

Erin smothered a smile. “Let me guess—you met The One. So what’s the count up to now—he’d be about the fifty-third ‘One’, wouldn’t he?”

“Hey, I can’t help it if a disproportionate number of men have feet of clay.” Mariel scowled half-heartedly, but the expression swiftly vanished. “You’re lucky, you know. You don’t have to deal with all that.”

Erin raised an eyebrow. “You think there aren’t a lot of women with feet of clay, too?”

“Maybe, but it’s not like...” Mariel’s voice trailed off, and an uncomfortable silence fell over them before Erin took pity on her friend.

“So, tell me about this new man.”

“His name is Rylan Murphy, and he’s gorgeous. I first saw him at the Friday night meet and greet. We hit it off right away and ended up spending the whole weekend together.”

“Did you check for a tan line on his ring finger?”

Mariel rolled her eyes. “Once. I made that mistake once... Well, twice, maybe.”

Erin snorted. “Mike Aden, Luke Pagette, Carl—”

Mariel held up a hand. “Okay, okay, three times, and that was all years ago, but the point is Rylan’s never even been married, let alone is he *still* married.”

“Are you sure he’s straight?”

Mariel waggled her eyebrows.

“Spare me the details. I’ll take your word for it.” Erin laughed when Mariel stuck out her tongue. “So, how did this perfect specimen slip past your radar in high school? I don’t remember any Rylan Murphy in our class.”

“Hah, like you had eyes for anyone but my sister.” Mariel’s eyes widened, and she covered her mouth.

But Erin just nodded. “You’re right. It’s funny. When we were kids I never thought of Gwen as anything but your big sister—the one we bugged to take us to the movies or buy us candy. But from the moment I saw her, when she came home from her first year in college, I knew she was the one for me. I remember praying night after night that she’d wait for me to grow up.”

They exchanged sad smiles.

“And she did,” Mariel said softly.

“Yes, she did.”

Mariel’s new *inamorato* forgotten, this time the silence was reflective, filled with shared memories of the woman they had both loved.

“I went out to see her, Erin.”

Erin nodded, the familiar lump in her throat.

“I took her roses. I told her they were from both of us.” Mariel’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Mom and Dad and Tony went with me. We were all surprised at what you’d had done to the headstone. I mean, I know you plan to join her there someday—not too soon, mind you, but I guess we figured that you’d have had the date engraved from the start if you were going to do it that way. When did you have it done, anyway? I didn’t even know you were thinking about it.”

Erin stared at her. “What are you talking about? What date?”

Mariel’s brow furrowed. “Your birth date, of course.”

“My birth date?” Erin shook her head.

“Yes, you know—with space left to fill in the rest of the equation when the time comes.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” In the four years since Erin had buried Gwen, she hadn’t been able to force herself back to the cemetery. “Maybe you were just mooning over Rylan and not seeing straight.”

Mariel frowned and grabbed for her overnight bag. She dug out her digital camera, turned it on, and clicked through a number of photos until she came to the one she was seeking. “Look. This is what I’m talking about.”

Erin’s hands trembled as she stared at the camera’s screen. The picture was small, but the clarity was sufficient to make out the details, which she already knew by broken heart.

Gwendolyn Christine Crane
March 26, 1973 – Oct 24, 2009
Taken too soon, and ever missed.

Erin Jean Sable
Beloved Partner

Squinting, Erin saw something unexpected below her name.

May 4, 1980 –

“What the...?” She looked up in shock.

Mariel canted her head. “You mean you weren’t the one who had the date engraved?”

Erin shook her head. “No. At the time it seemed too...macabre, I guess. It was hard enough arranging for Gwen’s inscription.”

Mariel knelt beside Erin’s chair and hugged her. “I know, sweetie. That was a terrible time for all of us, but for you... Hell, there were days when I didn’t think you’d survive.”

“If it weren’t for you and your family, I don’t think I would have.”

Mariel’s arms tightened. “We’re all still here for you. Mom and Dad miss you like crazy, and Tony wants to introduce his new girlfriend to you. He thinks she might be the—”

“The One?” Erin pulled back with a watery smile. “You and your brother are peas in a pod. I’m just glad Gwen was more like your folks.”

A gentle hand pushed Erin’s hair back behind her ears and wiped away the tears on her face. “Aw, sweetie, if Tony or I ever found someone who looked at us the way you two looked at each other, we’d stop searching, too.”

Erin dried her eyes on her sleeve. “I take it Rylan isn’t looking at you that way yet?”

Mariel laughed and rose to her feet. “Hon, I doubt Rylan would ever look at me like that.”

“So, not so much The One, as the ‘one right now and right there?’”

“Hey, you labelled him The One, not me.” Mariel shrugged. “Though I think I might talk to Zahra and see what she thinks.”

Erin rolled her eyes. Mariel swore by her psychic, but Erin had little use for such things and had refused repeated urgings to try a professional consultation. But the reference did tweak her memory, and she picked up a piece of paper from the end table. “Speaking of your spooky friend, she called yesterday and said it was urgent that you see her. She wanted you to call as soon as you got in, and she said to tell you that she’s holding a spot open for you after work tomorrow.”

“Hmm, I wonder what that’s all about.” Mariel scanned the message, then turned to leave the room. “I’d better call her right away.”

“She’s probably just short on cash or something,” Erin muttered.

“I heard that!” Mariel’s voice echoed down the hallway as she disappeared into her bedroom.

Erin shook her head. *I’m tired of fighting over Zahra. Mariel’s a big girl. If she wants to waste her money on mediums, it’s no business of mine.*

Setting aside the unpleasantness, she picked up the camera again and retrieved the picture of Gwen’s headstone. After long moments of study, she decided to contact the administration office at the cemetery. *There has to be a good explanation for this. Some paper-pusher obviously screwed up.*

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END OF EXCERPT

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AND
BEGONE**

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About Lois Cloarec Hart

Born and raised in British Columbia, Canada, Lois Cloarec Hart grew up as an avid reader but didn't begin writing until much later in life. Several years after joining the Canadian Armed Forces, she received a degree in Honours History from Royal Military College and on graduation switched occupations from air traffic control to military intelligence. Having married a CAF fighter pilot while in college, Lois went on to spend another five years as an Intelligence Officer before leaving the military to care for her husband, who was ill with chronic progressive Multiple Sclerosis and passed away in 2001. She began writing while caring for her husband in his final years and had her first book, *Coming Home*, published in 2001. It was through that initial publishing process that Lois met the woman she would marry in April 2007. She now commutes annually between her northern home in Calgary and her wife's southern home in Atlanta.

Lois is the author of four novels, *Coming Home*, *Broken Faith*, *Kicker's Journey*, *Walking the Labyrinth*, and a collection of short stories, *Assorted Flavours*. Her novel *Kicker's Journey* won the 2010 Independent Publisher Book Award bronze medal, 2010 Golden Crown Literary Awards, 2010 Rainbow Romance Writer's Award for Excellence, and 2009 Lesbian Fiction Readers Choice Award for historical fiction. *Broken Faith* (revised second edition) was published in print and e-formats in winter 2013. *Coming Home* (revised third edition) was published in spring 2014.

Visit her website: www.loiscloarechart.com

E-mail her at eljael@shaw.ca