

Losing Forever

by Gayle Friesen

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**For Bradey and Alex and the Mara gang
with love**

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The water at Mara waits for me. As soon as my foot hits the sun-warmed planks of the dock, I can sense the waiting. I walk to the end of the wharf — feel the movement of the waves beneath me, that slow, gentle rocking. Sometimes I wait for a long time, because I know in a split second it will be over — gone for another entire year. I actually shiver, even on the hottest days.

When I can't wait anymore, I raise my arms to the lost stars. Briefly I am air until my fingertips meet the water that lets me glide like a rainbow — fingers, wrists, elbows and the hot crown of my head. But then it's knees, ankles and toes. I'm always a little sad that I can't feel every inch of myself entering the water. My body follows too quickly to register the movement. But I always feel my feet, because they're last.

Once I'm in the water, that's when I greet her. "I'm back," I whisper. Mara shivers in response. My entry causes ripples to the farthest edges of her shore.

1

“What if Cinderella hadn’t been home that day?”

Sam didn’t answer. He was busy perfecting his lay-up shot in our backyard.

“Or what if Sleeping Beauty had just rolled over and snoozed for another ten years? Would her prince have waited, kept trying? Didn’t she have a real name? She must have had a name. Why can’t I remember —”

Sam tossed the ball, hard, in my direction. I held my arms out and deflected it so that it landed in the rosebush. Sam retrieved it quickly, checking the window to make sure Mom wasn’t watching.

“What’s with the fairy tales?” He threw the ball over his shoulder without looking at the hoop. As if. Missed by a mile. “Let’s play. I’ll give you a two-point lead.”

“Ooh, reverse psychology. That’s going to work — my mom’s been trying that on me for years.”

“Come on.”

“It’s too hot. What was her name? It’s driving me crazy.”

“Short trip. You live next door to crazy.”

“I live next door to you.”

He grinned his lopsided grin, braces gleaming, straw-colored hair hanging over his face like a droopy curtain. He pushed it back, revealing bright green eyes. “Snow White,” he said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“That was her name.”

I laughed. “Sleeping Beauty’s name was Snow White?” Sam could always make me laugh. We’d been friends forever. “Hmm. Actually, Snow White had it pretty good — living in that vine-covered cottage in the woods with her seven little friends. They probably went fishing all the time — swam in the lily pond, partied from dawn to dusk. Why did she trade it in for a boring old life in the castle? What do you want to bet she never even saw the old gang again after she hooked up with her prince? Can you imagine Dopey or Sneezy being invited to a royal ball? Uh-uh. No way.”

Sam stretched out his long legs on the deck chair. “What is with the fairy tales?” he asked again, gazing up at the sky, hands hooked behind his head.

“I was just thinking about lies in general. And that whole business of forever — loving someone forever, you know? It’s a big, fat fairy tale.”

“I’ll love you forever.” He grinned at me again.

I scowled so that I could actually feel the frown lines digging into my eyebrows. “Why do you say stuff like that?”

“To see you blush.” He reached for the camera in the bag beside his chair. Some people carry a rabbit’s foot; Sam always has his camera. You never know when a picture might show up, he liked to say. He had a million photo albums at home.

“No pictures,” I ordered, and he actually listened. Then I added more quietly, “and I don’t blush.”

“I know. You’re just mad that Dell has a boyfriend this summer.”

I grabbed my drink and drained it in one gulp until the ice cubes banged into my teeth. “It’s none of my business if she wants to go out with Marshall. Even if he *doesn’t* know her middle name.”

Sam gasped, flipping over so he landed in a heap on the deck. He kept his face down, flailing his fists against the faded planks. “The pig doesn’t know her middle name?” He raised himself onto his elbows and slowly inched his way toward me. “Say it isn’t so.”

“You’re going to get slivers.” I looked down at him.

“I’d welcome the pain if it helps me forget that Marshall doesn’t know Dell’s middle name.” He lifted his head and howled. “Jessica Joy Miner-Cooper.”

I jumped up at the sound of my own name. Jessica Joy. It sounded like a stuffed animal. And then there's the lying hyphenated last name.

I raced over to the water hose and aimed it at him, ready to fire.

"Jessica Joy — who's never coy," he sang off-key. "She ran away with the next-door boy."

I turned the hose on and managed to drench part of his shirt before he lunged at me.

Despite myself, I screamed and dropped the hose. I'm pretty tough, but I lose it when someone chases me.

I ran across the lawn, and I would have made it in the back door except for two things. One, Mom had just washed the floor and two, Sam had (as Mom-the-therapist would say) no boundaries when it came to winning. I made a last ditch run for the playhouse, but I could feel the spray hitting my legs. I stopped and let it happen. Sam howled with happiness and showed no mercy. Then, being the kind of guy he is, he turned the hose on himself. By now I was giggling helplessly — a girl thing I try to avoid, but there you go.

I grabbed two towels that were drying in the sun and threw one over to him. We spread them out and lay on our backs to dry off.

I could feel the heat of the midday sun spreading itself across me like a blanket.

"See that cloud, that wisp of a cloud that looks like a roof with the outlines of a house beneath it, Jes? That's a vine-covered cottage. We could live there —"

"Uh-huh, Dopey. Until a big storm moves in, right? Then what happens?"

He closed his eyes and raised his chin toward the sun. "You're the least romantic girl I've ever met. It's quite unnatural."

I scrambled to my feet and went to retrieve the basketball. "One on one, Dreamer Boy. And I'll spot *you* two points."

2

I held the receiver at arm's length, but I could still hear Dell's high-pitched, excited voice, even though the words were now reduced to a fuzzy babble. She'd spent the day with Marshall and I'd been listening — good friend that I was — for at least twenty minutes of play-by-play. But when she got to the part where she was naming their future children, I stopped paying attention.

Eventually I could tell there was silence at the other end, so I pulled the receiver quickly back to my ear. "Wow. Sounds like fun."

"I said he sprained his wrist."

"Oh." Busted. "Is he okay?"

"He didn't sprain his wrist. I was checking if you were listening. You were holding the phone away from your ear, weren't you?"

Busted again. She was good; I had to give her that.

"You want to come over tonight?" I asked. "Mom

and Cal are going out to plan some incredibly crucial detail of their wedding, like what color bow tie the caterer should wear. We could order pizza."

"Can't. Marshall's going to show me his baby home videos tonight. You could come."

I mimed a retching gesture with my finger down my throat and it made me feel a bit better.

"Well, that does sound exciting. Or, I could just sit in the lotus position in my bathroom and watch the mold spread across the tile grout."

"One, you don't do yoga. Two, your mother is going to kill you if you don't clean your bathroom and three ... why don't you like him?"

Her voice grew smaller on point three and I felt like the same scum she was absolutely right about my mom killing me over. "I do like him. I just don't know him very well. He is totally hot, I'll give you that."

"He is, isn't he?"

"A babe. Baborama. Babalicious."

"Jes."

"No, I mean it. He's cute. But I don't know if I'm ready to see him in diapers yet, okay? Or blowing out the candles on his first birthday cake. Besides, Mom said she's got this big surprise for me and she was all thrilled about it, so I better hang around."

"A surprise?" Dell sounded excited. "What do you think it is — a puppy?"

I laughed. “A puppy. Yeah, can’t you just see my mom in her designer suit holding a furry, hair-shedding, squirmy puppy?” I did my best “mom” impression. “‘Jes, honey, I know you’re not thrilled about getting a stepfather, but here’s a puppy ... so we’re even, okay?’ Yeah, I think you’re on to something there.”

“So when do you think you’re going to get used to the fact that your mother is totally serious about marrying this guy, like, in a month.”

“Like, never.”

“He’s pretty nice, as far as old guys go.”

“He’s a wiener.”

Dell laughed. “All beef or turkey?”

“Turkey.”

“Jessica.”

“Adele.”

“Name one totally bad, horrible thing about him.”

“He sucks his teeth, blinks when he’s nervous, tries too hard ... way, way too hard ...”

“One thing I said.”

“He shaves his legs.”

“That’s because he’s a cyclist.”

“I think he likes it.”

“You know what I think?”

“Like I could stop you from telling me.”

“I think you don’t like him because he’s not your father.”

She was, of course, right.

“Jes?”

“You know what I was thinking the other day, Dell? I was thinking that even though my mother is a psychologist, there probably is still room in my life — in my brain — for another person to go rummaging around. And that what I really, you know, desire is that at some point my brain would just open up and spill out so that anyone with a diploma or a really cool business suit could just go poking around, holding up my thoughts and feelings to the light whenever they wanted so that they could tell me what I’m thinking. Because I really need that, you know? I really am incapable of deciding what I feel and think. So I need all the help I can get. Really.”

Silence.

“So you don’t want to come over tonight?” she asked calmly.

“Maybe tomorrow. Say hi to Marshall for me.”

“One ... two ...”

I heard her say, “Three.” And then we both hung up.

Dell and I became friends in grade three. Until then I had mostly hung out with Sam, but he was going through his “girls are yucky” phase and I was stranded. When the teacher had changed the seating arrangement in the classroom, Dell and I were seated next to each other. I admired her

curly, red hair because it looked like a campfire and I told her so.

Her eyebrows shot way up and I thought at first I'd insulted her, but she dove for a notepad in her backpack and I saw her scribbling down my compliment word for word. I noticed her "p" was backward.

"That was descriptive," she whispered.

"Good word," I whispered back.

The teacher made us stay in at recess for talking and Dell drilled me with questions as we cleaned the chalk brushes. Where did I live? What was my favorite color? (Hers was fuchsia.) Wasn't *Baseball Ballerina* the best book ever? (I didn't know, but I said I'd read it.) How many brothers and sisters did I have? (She had a very mean sister named Pammy.)

I'd grown silent for a second, but then I told her what I had not yet said out loud to another person. "My sister died."

All of eight years old, she had wrapped her arm around my shoulder. She'd said nothing, but I saw a big tear fall to the floor. Our friendship was forged on chalk dust and a tear.

Now I warmed up the supper Mom had left, such as it was. Leftover (dried out) chicken with soupy mashed potatoes. I pushed the baby carrots to the side — they'd been microwaved into dehydrated toes.

Lately I'd been reading magazines with recipes in them, mostly in the hope that there was something in the world of cuisine that didn't require a can of mushroom soup. Cooking totally mystified my mom. Cooking and — lately — me.

"Why don't you like Cal?" She had asked after our first dinner together. "Why don't you give him a chance? He's a *terrific* guy."

Terrific. Terr-I-fic. That's how she'd said it. Maybe I'd only been around for fifteen years, but I knew suspicious words when I heard them. *Terrific*, *super*, *fabulous* — they all set off an alarm inside my brain because they hid another meaning, one not nearly as terrific, super or fabulous. Words that hid a lie. Words like *forever*.

I scraped my plate and put it into the dishwasher.

Mom had brought Cal home six months ago. She'd already been seeing him for a while. They worked at the same counseling group and between the two of them, they knew everything. Their big entertainment was to watch television and analyze body language. Talk shows were their favorite. "See how she's crossing her arms? Defensive. Check out that bouncing foot across the knee. Nervous, anxious." And they'd laugh hilariously. I'd turn up the volume, thinking that maybe the dialogue could actually tell me something.

“So, Jessica, you’re in grade nine?” That had been Cal’s opening line when he met me.

“Yup.”

“You like school?” Highly original.

“It’s okay.”

“Your mother says you’re a whiz in English. You like to read?”

“Yup.”

“I never read much in school. Didn’t like novels. I prefer true stories.”

You know the sound that water makes when the last of it is being sucked down the drain? That was the exact noise I heard in my head when he said that.

“Funny, I always thought fiction was about truth.”

Old Cal had looked kind of bemused at that and tipped his head to the right. (Mom always tips hers to the left.) He’d put his finger on his chin and said, “Hmm, that’s interesting.”

Interesting. Add that to the *terrific, super, fabulous* list. Sounds like one thing. Generally means another.

There was no air moving inside the house, so I went to the backyard. I picked up the basketball and took a shot. It swished through the net neatly. Out of habit, I glanced over to Sam’s house, but it was quiet. They’d gone up to the lake for the

weekend. Sam had two younger brothers, Henry and Danny, and when they were home, you knew it. Sam pretended his brothers were a pain in the butt, but it wasn’t true. He was the best big brother I could imagine. He was always showing them how to do things, like flying a kite or throwing a baseball. We’d known each other since we were babies. Literally. Our moms took us for walks in our carriages together, sent us to swimming lessons and drama camp together. He was my best friend next to Dell.

Sam almost blew it, though, last year. Out of nowhere. We’d gone Rollerblading and I’d swerved to miss a crazed power walker. I’d landed in the bushes and Sam helped me to my feet with a silly smile on his face. Before I could wipe the dirt off my elbow pads, he just did it — grabbed me and kissed me! To be fair, he looked surprised after he’d done it, but he made it worse when he tried to explain.

“You just looked so cute down there ... all ruffled and ... cute.”

Cute! I’d exploded. “Don’t call me cute!” Ugh. It was not my fault that my parents’ genes had conspired to leave me with a shrimpy, five foot practically nothing form that had already threatened to stop growing. I didn’t want to be cute. I felt huge inside, like a giant forced to live in a doghouse. I wanted to loom, to fly, to soar above the

regular. I wanted to stoop for things, not reach — always looking up into someone's nose hair. I wanted to be the same six feet tall on the outside that I knew I was on the inside.

You're so intense, I could almost hear Dell say.

That was the nice thing about best friends. They hung with you even if they weren't actually there.

I took another shot. It hit the rim and wobbled, then fell away.

I hadn't talked to Sam for two weeks after "the kiss." He tried phoning; I hung up. He'd come over; I'd pretend I wasn't home. Finally he slipped a note under the door with a stick-figure boy holding his decapitated head. "I lost my mind," the caption read. I forgave him then, but he was still on probation.

"Yoo-hoo. We're home." Mom's voice trickled across the backyard. Then I saw her peeking through the back window. She waved me inside — right, the surprise. Dell's theory crossed my mind, but I knew it was a long shot even though I'd been asking for a dog since I was ten.

Still, I felt a twinge of anticipation.

"Honey," Mom met me with a too-tight hug and I could tell she was nervous. Body language. What can I say? You live with a shrink, some of it rubs off.

"I have a big surprise for you."

Crazy thoughts twisted inside me. "Cal and I have broken up." "The wedding's off." "Your father

and I are getting back together." Or, at the very least — "Say hello to Rover."

"Okay, Cal," I heard Mom say. "You can bring her in."

Cal walked through the door, grinning like a jack-o'-lantern. Behind him was a girl. Screech and thud. The doggy dream smashed into the wall. I tipped my head to the left. No, not a girl. Somebody's idea of female perfection floated like a hologram into the room. Long, blond, crinkly hair, dazzling green cat eyes, slender and tall. Utter perfection, like she should be running across a beach in slow motion — like she should go everywhere in slow motion.

"You remember I told you Cal had a daughter the same age as you? Angela? Well, here she is."

"Your new sister," Cal said.

I saw Mom bite her lip as soon as these words were uttered. She bit her upper lip and a shadow of remembering crossed her face.