**Like Falling Snow**

Hi, my name is Noelle.

And his? His name is Gabriel.

We met a year ago in March; the snow had thawed, the trees started to bud, flowers began to bloom, the birds sang once again, and the sky was no longer bleak and grey.

He seemed to fit in with the type of people I avoided. The superficial people that would often party during the week, immerse themselves in materialistic things, talk of their latest relationship issues, and gossip. People I wouldn’t associate myself with, ever.

But that all changed one day after class. The bell rang and I gathered my books in my arms, hugging them to my chest. I planned the quickest route to my locker to avoid encountering anyone.

That’s when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Excuse me, I couldn’t help noticing your necklace.”

I turned around to match the voice to a face, and took in an inquiring look and hazel eyes. It was the boy who sat beside me in class.

“Oh,” I blushed. “It’s a snowflake pendant.”

“Cool. By the way, my name’s Gabriel.”

“Noelle,” I told him quietly.

He smiled and eyed my pendant.

“Your pendant’s nice. Where’d you get it?”

“Um, i-it was a gift from…My m-mother.”

Mother. I hadn’t said that word in a very long time. My eyes started to sting, and I looked down at my feet to avoid eye contact. My head started to spin as memories whirled through my mind.

“Hey, I’m here to talk if you ever need someone to talk to.”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up with compassion. My throat choked up as I tried to swallow my emotions.

“Thanks,” I managed to say.

I left him standing there as I rushed down the hall, dodging people as I fought back my tears.

“Noelle! Hey!”

Gabriel’s voice echoed through the hallway, and people averted their eyes from their conversations to him.

“Great. Attention,” I mumbled as I sped up my pace.

I walked hurriedly and turned the corner of the hallway, hoping to lose him. I wished I wasn’t so awkward. Why was he so intent on talking to me anyway? Pushing the metal doors open, I walked outside. Warm sunshine flooded onto my skin. Closing my eyes, I inhaled the fresh spring air.

Gabriel came out a moment later.

“Noelle, are you okay?”

I turned around and faced him. He had a sincere look of concern on his face.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

I tried to pretend he wasn’t there. I built an invisible brick wall around myself, layering brick upon brick. That didn’t work really well, as he demolished the brick wall and continued to interrogate me.

“Are you sure?”

Was I? No. But why was Gabriel talking to me? I’d never spoken to him before that awkward encounter after class.

“I-I don’t want to be rude, but why are you so worried about me? I’ve never talked to you before.”

Gabriel looked down at his shoes. I hoped that didn’t come out wrong. I bit my lip self-consciously.

“Well… My mom – she…” He trailed off.

He looked up into the bright blue sky, so I looked up too. There was not a cloud in sight. When I looked back down again, I saw him clenching his fists. Tears brimmed from the pool of hazel in his eyes.

“I know what you’re going through, Noelle. And it sucks. I thought maybe we could talk.”

So we did.

He told me about his mother. She had frequent migraines, to the point where she couldn’t focus for periods of time. One day she fainted and was rushed to the hospital. After visiting the ER, the doctors told her she had a brain tumour and six months left to live. She died within a year.

“Losing my mom like that… It wasn’t fair. I couldn’t do anything but watch her die,” he told me, in tears. I cried with him.

I started talking to him regularly and we became a lot closer. Some might have fallen for him because of his personality, his kindness, or even the big smile that was planted on his face when he was happy – which was most of the time. For me, it was those moments of understanding that we had in common and the joy that he would fill me with. I shared things with him that I had bottled up inside of me.

As he lowered his guard with me, I slowly lowered mine, too. I dismantled my wall brick by brick. Eventually, he melted all the ice that encased my heart. It was then that I started feeling something again – it felt like everything was going to be okay.

One day, we met after school at a coffee shop. As we ordered our drinks, he asked the waitress for two slices of cake. I looked at him and raised my eyebrows.

“It’s on me. Today’s my mom’s birthday,” he said. He gave me a sad smile.

The cakes came and he dug out two candles; carefully aligning them with the intricate chocolate webbing iced onto the cakes. He drew a lighter from his pocket and lit the candles.

“Two candles?” I asked him. “Why two?”

Gabriel laughed. “One wish for my mom, and one wish for yours.”

A wish. A wish for my mother. I smoothed the pendant on my neck. I didn’t know what to wish for: she was gone. Gabriel blew out his candles and accidentally blew out mine too.

“Oops,” he said with eyes widened.

“It’s okay, I didn’t know what to wish for anyway,” I told him.

“What wish would you give your mom if it could come true?” he asked.

Silence grew between us.

“…For forgiveness,” I finally said.

“You haven’t told me what happened to your mom,” he said.

I couldn’t speak for a moment – I didn’t know what to say to him.

“She… T-they found her i-in…” A wave of immense sadness crashed onto me as I remembered what happened.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. He took my hands in his.

I gulped down the tears that started to well in my eyes.

“Okay,” I told him. I tried to believe that it was.

As I pieced the words together, they slowly flowed from my voice like an icicle trickling in a breeze of spring warmth.

“This snowflake pendant…”

I undid the clasp and placed it in his palm.

“My mother gave it to me before everything happened. She told me it was to remind me of her love. She also told me to remember why she named me Noelle when I wear it – because I reminded her of the warmth and joy that comes at Christmas time.”

Gabriel smoothed the opal surface between his fingers. Ambient specks flickered in the autumn sunlight that penetrated the glass windows of the coffee shop, and onto his face.

“But… That was before everything. Then I remember how she was often angry at my dad and me. I wanted to tell her that she was being insensitive and my dad was stressed about work, too, not just her. Some days I would come home from school to find her lying on the couch, burying her face in the cushions.”

He nodded as he listened and pressed his warm fingers and the cool pendant into my hands. I placed it back in his palm.

“You keep it,” I told him.

His face broadened into a smile and he slipped it into his pocket. I continued my story.

“She stopped talking to us. Sometimes when she did talk, it didn’t make sense. She spoke of water and snow and how cold it was. One time she went into the guest room and locked the door, staying in there for days. My dad would stand at the door and knock every other hour. He even brought meals to the door. She left them untouched, though. It felt like she wasn’t there anymore. That really agitated me, and I started to hate her.”

We finished our coffee and cakes and walked outside into the frigid autumn air. My breath curled in the air around me.

“She came out occasionally, looking exhausted, but somewhat alert. Then one day, she came out of her room in a panic. I remember that day – it was the first snowfall. She started to yell about someone calling her to the water. I don’t know. I ignored her, mostly because I was angry at her.”

I stopped walking and Gabriel looked at me; sympathy swam in his hazel eyes.

“So, what happened next?” he asked.

“When I came home the next day, the guest room door was opened. I didn’t think much of it or care much, either. She was still gone when my dad got back from work. It was dark out, and he was really worried. He called the police, but it was too late.”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore, and suddenly started to sob. My lungs violently shook my ribcage, rattling the bones they were held under with uncontrollable tremors. Gabriel took me into his arms, embracing me.

“They f-found her i-in the lake,” I sobbed. “They t-told us sh-she overdosed.”

I looked into his eyes.

“It was all my fault,” I cried.

He cried with me.

December quickly approached. My entire neighbourhood was adorned in Christmas lights. The snow was falling again, dancing in the streetlights as they floated down. The ground was blanketed with a soft layer of shimmering fluff. Seeing that my house was empty, I threw on a coat and a pair of boots and headed outside. I breathed in the snowflakes and watched my breath diffuse in the air around me.

The snow crunched beneath my feet as I trudged to a coffee shop. Light emanated from the fluorescent bulbs radiating through its glass windows, contrasting with the darkness that surrounded everything. I noted it was empty except for two figures sitting near the window inside the shop, nestling and immersed with one another. I plodded through the snow towards the door and pulled it open. It was then that I saw the inconceivable. I felt a sharp jolt in my chest. I stood still.

Gabriel. The boy who unlocked my heart, the boy who comforted me with a warm embrace when I cried, the boy whom I had shared the entirety of myself, the boy who had made me feel alive again. Gabriel.

He was embracing a girl.

He looked up from the girl’s arms to the ring of the store bell. Our eyes met.

“Noelle,” he mouthed, eyes widened with shock.

I ran.

I threw open the door and ran in the snow. I ran and ran until I couldn’t feel my toes, fingers, or ears anymore, numbed by the frigid air. The warm tears on my face soon froze into cold droplets.

It felt like his nails dug in and reached for my heart, tearing it from my chest. He didn’t love me – not the way I loved him. Why couldn’t I see that he didn’t love me? Feelings of spite and despair ripped through my skull, searing the part of my brain that felt love. I pushed the bubbling feelings down my chest, swallowing the agony and pain that had birthed within me.

I loved Gabriel. I hated myself because of that.

As I suppressed my feelings, the flame dimmed. Part of my soul died with the flame. All that was left was the empty void of my being.

That night, I vowed not to speak to him ever again. It’d be easy. No more words could be said, for they had leaked away along with the rest of my emotions.

Spring arrived quicker than I thought it’d come. All evidence of a harsh winter had blown away by the warm spring air. My mother’s birthday quickly approached along with the budding flowers and chirping birds.

“How ‘bout some cake?” Dad asked me.

“Sure,” I said with a faint smile.

Moments later we were seated in the coffee shop, slowly sipping black coffee and sharing a slice of raspberry cheesecake: Her favourite.

The jingle of a bell rang as the door opened. A chilly breeze swirled towards me and nipped at my ankles. I turned around in my chair.

It was Gabriel.

Three months had passed since that night. I cringed, and my hands trembled. I remembered the weeks filled with tears. The shock. The feeling of my heart shrivelling into a cocoon of sadness.

My cup slipped from my hands and shattered on the floor.

We stared at each other for a short moment. There was profound sadness condensed in his eyes. I turned away. He walked out.

Though I no longer talk to him, I’ve shared so much of myself with him than I have with anyone else. He gave me hope in the darkest times of my life. For that, I was grateful. I will always remember the comfort and love he so freely gave me.

But despite the memories – the memories that fill my mind day in and day out – I can’t love him anymore.

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