

PROLOGUE

Myrtle stood in a place she did not recognize.

The world around her was silent, the air still and colorless. Snow stretched endlessly in every direction, smooth and untouched, glimmering faintly beneath a pale sky. She tried to breathe, but the cold did not bite and her breath left no trace in the air. Something in the silence felt wrong, like the world was waiting for her to notice it.

A faint ringing drifted through the quiet, almost hidden beneath the stillness. It came from everywhere and nowhere at once, humming through the ground beneath her boots. When she took a step, the sound deepened. When she stopped, it faded. The valley seemed to listen for her movement, as if testing her presence.

Far below, the snow gave way to a frozen lake that shimmered with light. Beneath the ice, she saw faint outlines of towers and arches, a city buried and unmoving. The ringing grew clearer, pulsing from within the ice as if calling her by name.

She knelt at the edge. The frozen surface mirrored her faintly, but the face staring back looked older, the eyes shadowed with someone else's memories. Beneath the glassy surface, a small golden light flickered. It pulsed softly, alive and steady, and without thinking, Myrtle reached toward it.

The moment her fingertips touched the ice, the air rippled. The wind halted. The snow froze in midair. Even time seemed to draw in a breath.

Behind her, the silence changed.
Someone was watching.

Myrtle turned. At the top of the ridge stood a figure wrapped in pale light, neither man nor woman, its shape shifting like mist. She could not see its face, but the light around it moved with the same rhythm as the ringing beneath her feet. The figure lifted its hand. Something glimmered within its palm, a ring of silver and gold twisted together, breathing with quiet light.

Her pulse quickened. She stepped backward, but the figure did not follow. The wind carried a single word to her, soft and echoing inside her chest rather than her ears.

“Listen.”

The world seemed to lean closer.

She blinked, and the figure was suddenly nearer, standing across the frozen lake. The ring's glow reflected on the ice, scattering gold ripples beneath her. The city below stirred. Light crawled through its streets, tracing rooftops and windows, awakening what had been sleeping for ages.

Myrtle's heart pounded, caught between wonder and fear. The figure reached forward, and before she could understand how, the ring appeared in her own hand. It was light and warm, the hum of it steady and alive.

She studied it, her breath trembling. The metal was worn yet gleamed faintly, and inside, strange markings spiraled inward like a whisper of language she almost knew. Comfort and unease braided together until she could no longer tell them apart.

The ice cracked softly beneath her boots. Beneath the surface, the buried city brightened. A slow heartbeat pulsed from the depths, steady and familiar, answering the rhythm of her own.

The voice returned, quieter this time.

“Not yet.”

The mountains darkened. The golden light below faded until her face was lit only by the soft glow of the ring. The bell sound deepened, each toll stretching through the air until the silence felt endless.

She turned toward the ridge, but the figure had vanished. Only the sigh of wind remained, thin and tired. The snow began to fall again, soft and slow, covering her footprints. The ring’s light dimmed until it looked like an ordinary piece of metal, though its warmth lingered in her palm.

Then she saw a doorway ahead of her.

It stood alone in the snow, made of dark wood and leaning slightly as if weary from time.

Strange carvings lined the lintel, half symbols and half scratches, as though someone had tried to erase what had once been written there.

She felt drawn toward it. The faint ringing followed her, distant now, fading into the cold. When she reached the door, she hesitated. Something within her wanted to open it. Something else warned her not to.

Her hand rose slowly. The instant her fingers touched the handle, the world stopped.

The wind died. The snow hung motionless. Even her heartbeat paused.

And then—

She woke.

Myrtle sat up in bed, her breath uneven. Her room was quiet except for the soft ticking of the clock by the window. Pale morning light spilled across the floorboards. The dream slipped away in fragments, though the sound of the bell still echoed faintly in her ears.

Her hand was curled against her chest. When she opened it, she saw only her own skin, but her palm felt warm, as if something small had rested there. She took a slow breath and tried to shake the feeling.

Outside, the wind pressed against the windowpanes, and for a moment she thought she heard the faint ringing again. Then it was gone.

Myrtle lay back on her pillow. Soon the morning would begin, filled with lessons, chatter, and ordinary things. Yet as she stared at the ceiling, she could not escape the quiet thought that somewhere, far beneath her waking world, something was waiting.

Editor’s Comment: Since now “The voice” has been moved to the prologue, repeating the same motif in “A whisper in the shadows” would only serve to weaken the impact of prologue. So one we need to change that name, and two, we need to revise the chapter one’s opening. Below is a revised version which we can use instead.”

Chapter One: Beneath the Quiet

Myrtle woke with a start.

The air in her room was still, the pale light of dawn spreading slowly across the floorboards. For an instant, she expected to see snow outside her window, to hear the faint ringing from her dream echo through the silence. But there was only the soft ticking of the clock and the sigh of the wind against the glass.

Her hand rested over her heart. The warmth from the dream lingered there, a ghost of something that refused to fade. She looked down at her open palm, half-expecting to see the glimmering ring she had held only moments before. There was nothing. Yet her skin tingled as if the memory of it still burned faintly beneath the surface.

She drew a slow breath, telling herself it had been nothing more than imagination. Still, the feeling of being watched, of something unseen waiting beyond the veil of morning, pressed against her thoughts.

A gentle knock broke the quiet.

“Myrtle?” Mrs. Harcourt’s voice carried through the door, calm but expectant.

“Yes, Mrs. Harcourt,” Myrtle answered, though her voice trembled.

The door opened, revealing the housekeeper’s familiar silhouette framed by the light from the corridor. Her eyes took in every detail — the unmade bed, the untouched tea on the table, the distracted girl sitting on the edge of the mattress.

“Your parents expect you ready by noon,” Mrs. Harcourt said. “We have little time to prepare.”

Myrtle nodded, unable to meet her gaze. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Harcourt crossed the room with her usual brisk grace, selecting gowns from the wardrobe and laying them across the chair. “The carriage will leave shortly after the midday bell,” she added. “Lady Eleanor insists on punctuality.”

“Yes,” Myrtle murmured, though her thoughts were elsewhere.

The dream lingered at the edge of her awareness — not its images, which had already begun to blur, but its weight, its silence, its strange sense of expectation. She wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and tried to focus on the sound of Mrs. Harcourt’s movements, the rustle of silk, the soft clink of metal clasps. Ordinary sounds. Safe sounds.

Yet beneath them all, she thought she could still hear it — that faint, distant hum from beneath the world, waiting.