

A Winter Ghost Story

The first thing everyone noticed was the silence. It arrived with the snow, slipping into the village of Frostmere so gently that no one realised it was there until it stayed too long. At first, people welcomed it. Winter always softened the world—cars drove slower, voices lowered, and the thick white snow absorbed sound like a blanket. But this silence was different. It lingered. The church bell rang on Sunday morning, but the sound barely travelled past the front steps. Dogs barked with their mouths wide open, yet their noise seemed swallowed before it reached the air. Even the river that cut through the village, once loud and restless, now slid beneath the ice without a whisper.

People joked about it at first. "Must be the snow," they said. "Cold air does strange things." Only Eliza noticed when the silence began to listen back. Eliza lived with her grandmother in a narrow house at the edge of the village, where the forest pressed close like a crowd of dark figures. She liked winter more than most. Snow made the world feel paused, as if she could breathe without rushing.

But late one night, while sitting by the window, she felt something odd. The silence felt heavy. Not empty—full. She pressed her palm against the cold glass and listened carefully. No wind. No owl. No distant footsteps. And yet, she had the sudden, uncomfortable feeling of being heard.

The next morning, footprints appeared in the snow outside their house. They were barefoot. They started at the tree line and stopped just below Eliza's window. Her grandmother frowned when she saw them.

"That's not right," she murmured, crossing herself.

"Maybe someone was sleepwalking," Eliza offered, though she didn't believe it. Bare feet would have frozen solid long before reaching the house. The footprints vanished the next day, erased by fresh snow. But the silence grew thicker, pressing into rooms and wrapping around conversations. People began speaking louder without realising it, as if trying to fight something invisible.

Then the disappearances began. Not dramatic ones. No screaming. No broken doors. People simply failed to arrive. The postman didn't come one morning. The baker's shop stayed dark. A boy from Eliza's class never returned after winter break. When villagers went to check on the missing, they found warm houses, meals half-eaten, beds still rumped. It was as if the people had stepped outside and never come back.

One evening, Eliza heard humming. It came from the forest. A soft, low tune that wove through the trees like breath through teeth. She pulled on her coat before she could talk

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herself out of it. Something in the sound felt familiar, like a memory she couldn't quite reach. The forest was silent except for the hum. Snow crunched under her boots as she followed it deeper between the trees. The air grew colder, sharper. Her breath fogged thickly, but the humming stayed steady, calm.

She found him near the frozen creek. He stood barefoot on the ice, untouched by the cold. He looked young—no older than twenty—with dark hair dusted in snow. His clothes were old-fashioned, thin, completely wrong for winter. And he was transparent. Eliza didn't scream. She didn't run. The ghost turned to her, eyes pale and tired.

"You can hear me," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Eliza replied, surprised by how steady her voice sounded.

His shoulders sagged in relief. "Good. That means it's not too late." He told her his name was Thomas. Long ago, Frostmere had been louder. Bells, laughter, music spilling from the tavern. Thomas had loved the noise. When he died—lost in a winter storm just beyond the forest—he waited for someone to notice his silence. No one did. Years passed. Then decades. Then centuries. "I didn't mean to take them," he said quietly. "I just wanted someone to hear how cold it was."

Eliza felt a chill that had nothing to do with the air. "The missing people...?"

"I don't take their bodies," Thomas said. "Only their sound. Their voices. Their footsteps. Their place in the world. Without sound," he explained, "people slowly faded. Forgotten by the village, erased by the quiet. The snow helps," he added. "It listens."

Eliza swallowed. "Why now?"

Thomas looked at the village lights glowing faintly through the trees. "Because winter has grown longer. And people have grown quieter." She thought of her grandmother, alone by the fire. Of empty desks at school. Of a village being gently erased, one silence at a time.

"There has to be another way," Eliza said.

Thomas studied her carefully. "You're still loud inside," he said. "That's rare." Together, they formed a plan.

The next morning, Eliza rang the church bell. Not once. Not twice. She rang it until her arms burned and the sound cracked through the silence like ice breaking on a lake. The noise echoed farther than it had in weeks, spilling through streets and into houses. People came out, blinking and confused. Then Eliza did something stranger. She told stories. She stood in the square and spoke loudly about the village—its history, its people, the jokes and arguments and tiny moments that made Frostmere *alive*. Others joined in, laughing,

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arguing, singing badly on purpose. Noise returned, messy and human. The silence fought back. Snow fell heavier, thick and fast, trying to smother the sound. Eliza's voice nearly gave out. Then a new sound joined hers humming. Thomas stood at the edge of the square, solidifying with every note. His song twisted through the air, not quiet but strong, full of grief and warmth and longing. It didn't steal sound—it *returned* it. The snow slowed. The silence cracked. By nightfall, the missing villagers were back. Confused, cold, but alive. Thomas faded as the noise grew. Before he disappeared, he smiled at Eliza. "Thank you for listening," he said.

Winter still comes to Frost mere. Snow still falls thick and soft. But now, when the world grows too quiet, Eliza listens carefully—and makes sure the silence never listens back.