

“The Sister Mystery”

Written by Summer Sheffer (10)

Once there were two sisters who did everything together. But only one of them disappeared.

In a small, cozy cottage in the northern forest, the two sisters of the family Winters were getting up the morning of Christmas Eve. They were going to make pinecone garlands to hang on the walls and put the ornaments on their pretty little tree. Of the two sisters, Lily was taller with straight brown hair. She was pretty and had sharper features than Belle, with chilly dark blue eyes. Belle had one pale blue eye and one pale green eye, wavy golden brown hair and a rounder face. They were walking to the small kitchen, when suddenly a furry blur, the same color as Belle's hair, came running towards them. It made a flying leap and landed on Belle, who caught it with a laugh. “Silly Taffy!” Taffy, who was now laying on her shoulders looking like part of her hair, gave a contented meow and started purring. In the kitchen he leaped down and went over to the cabinet where they kept the fish. The cat looked meaningfully up at them. “Alright, we’ll give you breakfast,” Lily said. She got out a small fish and laid it in the cat bowl. “You’re food, good sir,” she said, with a bow. Belle giggled. Lily went over to a cabinet and grabbed two eggs, then went over to cook them. “When should we go?” her sister asked. “How about after we grab our bags and eat breakfast,” Lily replied. “For decorations, we could get holly and pine boughs with pinecones,” She flipped the eggs onto the other side and watched them sizzle. Belle got the forks from a compartment in the table where she was sitting. Lily got out two blue rimmed plates and flipped the eggs onto them. She handed one to her sister and kept one for herself.

After they had eaten, Belle and Lily grabbed their messenger bags. Belle's had pale blue flowers with green leaves, Lilly's had green pine needles and purple violets. They set out to the forest in their matching dark green cloaks after leaving a note to their parents. It was snowing, covering the trees and already white ground. "How about you go that way, and I'll go this way." Lilly said, pointing in two directions. "Sure," Belle replied. "Meet back here in an hour?" Her sister nodded and they set off.

Lily was walking along, plucking pinecones and needles and putting them in her bag, when she heard footsteps behind her. She assumed it was Belle, since there was no one else for miles. She pretended not to notice, picked a holly berry and swung around and threw it at her sister.

Except, it *wasn't* her sister. It was a stranger, with long black hair and a raven perched on her shoulder. Lilly screamed and ran, but the stranger didn't follow. She simply raised her arm in Lily's direction and whispered something. Lily didn't hear what she said, but all of a sudden she felt very tired. She fell, and the last thing she saw before everything went dark was the stranger's pale face staring down at her.

Meanwhile, Belle was unaware of her sister's perilous situation. She was walking along, throwing snowballs at trees. Up ahead, she spotted a low hanging branch, about two feet above her head. She started running, her cloak billowing out behind her. She leaped, reaching out for the branch. She caught it and swung on it before dropping down. She went over to a holly bush and picked some leaves. She set them in her satchel, careful not to crumple them. After she picked the leaves and branches for what she thought was forty minutes, she started heading back to the cottage. When she got to the spot where she was supposed to meet her sister, no one was

there. She waited for about ten minutes, but her sister didn't show. She decided to go back to the cottage and start decorating.

After an hour of crafting and decorating, Belle was starting to get worried. Usually her sister was the one waiting. She was always punctual, if not early. Belle's mother walked into the kitchen and came over to give Belle a hug. "Where's your taller shadow?" her mother asked. She often referred to the sisters as shadows, because they spent so much time together. "I don't know. We went out to gather decorations, but I haven't seen her since," Belle replied. She frowned. "What if something happened to her?" Her mother went over to the counter to get out ingredients. "I'm sure she just got distracted. While we wait for her, why don't we start making the mashed potatoes?" But Lily didn't come back. Not when they were making dinner, not when they were hanging decorations, not when they took the duck out from the fireplace pot. She even missed her favorite part of Christmas, decorating the tree. But no one but Belle thought to worry, since the girls were always in the woods. But Belle knew that her sister would never be late, or ever worry her. It was late afternoon and she still hadn't shown up. She'd been gone for nearly eleven hours. They'd thought that she'd lost track of time, that she'd gone to town, which was ten miles away, but their brown and white horse, Parsnip, was still in her stable. They thought that perhaps she'd decided to walk there, but eventually she'd been gone too long for even that. Now everyone was worried. Her father took a lantern and went out to the stable to get Parsnip. He was going to ride to town to see if anyone knew where Lily was. Belle and her mother went out into the forest to look for footprints, or anything that pointed to where her sister was. But none of them could find her. Her mother and Belle came back to the house and half an hour later her father and Parsnip showed up too. They ate their cold food in a worried silence, then went to bed. But Belle couldn't sleep. It was weird being alone, and she couldn't fall asleep

when the room was so still, without her sister's quiet breathing in the other bed. She got up and went out to sit on the window bench in the kitchen. Taffy came and laid on her lap, and his sweet purrs soothed her. She brought him back to her room and laid down. This time she fell asleep, but her dreams were restless, visions of all the terrible things that might have happened to her sister.

Around 1 year later

Belle was riding Parsnip in the forest, farther than she'd ever gone before. Earlier, in the summer, her parents had given her permission to take the horse out into the forest. So now here she was, enjoying a small picnic of meatballs and mashed potatoes. It was chilly in early November, but she'd brought her cloak and boots, as well as a horse blanket for Parsnip. Suddenly she heard a girl's voice from off to her left, shouting loudly. Belle leaped to her feet and approached the mossy clearing near her. She accidentally stepped on a brittle twig and looked up sharply. There was a girl on the other edge of the clearing, sitting on the ground. She was leaning over a green leather book but looked up as the stick crunched. Belle's eyes widened. Not because it was a stranger. It was because she was so familiar. The girl ran, clutching the book. As Belle followed her, the girl opened the book and shouted "Covanius!" And then as suddenly as Belle had found her, she vanished into thin air. *What just happened?* Belle couldn't figure it out. She walked around a bit, but she couldn't find her. Eventually she went back to Parsnip and packed up her food. She rode in a wide circle, looking for the girl. For a while she was alone in the forest. And then she came upon an old abandoned house. She left Parsnip outside and went up to knock on the door. It creaked open on ancient hinges. She leaned in, peering around.

“Hello?” No one answered. She stepped into the house and chose a hallway from the foyer. It lead into a kitchen, which lead into a butler's pantry. At the end of the corridor, there was an opening to a cave. She wandered down the stone tunnel, which was lit with clear glass lanterns hung from the roof. Down the path Belle spotted wooden doors, from under which different bursts of colored light erupted. She crept along the path, looking for an open door. She found one, and peered in. The girl she had spotted earlier was standing in the room with a woman with long black hair and another who sat on a stool. She was explaining something rapidly. The one with the black hair turned toward the doorway and spotted Belle. Quick as lightning, she flicked her wrist. Belle felt ice grip her legs and torso as it rose from the ground up. “That’s her!” The girl exclaimed. And now Belle knew, with a sinking certainty, that she was right. “Lilly?” Belle whispered, disbelieving. “Who’s Lilly?” her sister asked.

Belle was sitting in a brightly lit stone cave on a stool, an actual snake binding her wrists together. She’d been sitting there for an hour, waiting for someone to show up. Five minutes later, someone did show up. It was the woman who'd frozen her. “Hello. My name is Ravenna. We want to let you out of here. So, why don’t you answer a few questions for us.” Ravenna asked her all sorts of questions, mainly about why she was here. Then Belle was escorted out into the stone tunnels and handed over to the girl. “What's your name?” The girl asked. “Belle,” She replied. “Viola,” the girl said. “Let’s go,” Viola led the way down the tunnel, taking a right, then left, then right again. They came to a stop in front of a spruce door. Viola turned the golden handle and they went in. The room had bunk beds and two desks. Viola sat on a chair by one desk, motioning for Belle to sit on the other. “Who’s Lilly?” She asked Belle. “My sister. Or...You.” Belle replied. Viola’s face looked incredulous. “What? I’ve never met you. And my name’s Viola,” Viola didn’t

know what to say. “Well, how long have you been here?” Belle asked. “They found me washed up in a river last Christmas.” Belle’s eyes widened. “That’s when Lily went missing!” Viola suddenly had a dizzying sense of déjà-vu, as she remembered something long forgotten. A memory of looking into wide eyes just like this, blue and green. As her *sister’s* voice echoed throughout her head. “But... I didn’t have a family. They threw me in the river, or didn’t care enough to save me from being swept away.” Viola replied. But now she remembered. She remembered Ravenna, reciting a spell to make her fall asleep. “But that’s not true, is it? It was the witches.” Belle brightened. “So you remember us? Will you come home?” Viola had never thought that the word home could sound so wonderful. “I would, but you’re not allowed to leave, and neither am I.” Belle looked thoughtful “Do you know why they took you?” Viola paused. “ They didn’t tell me, but they said I had strong magic, so maybe that’s what they wanted. Maybe we could sneak out.”

So ten minutes later, Viola was walking along the tunnel with Belle and herself under a cloak spell. They made it to the abandoned house without being seen, but as they got to the front door, Ravenna stepped into view. “Stop!” Viola glanced at Belle, and their eyes met. They bolted outside into the rain. And so there she was, running from a witch once again.