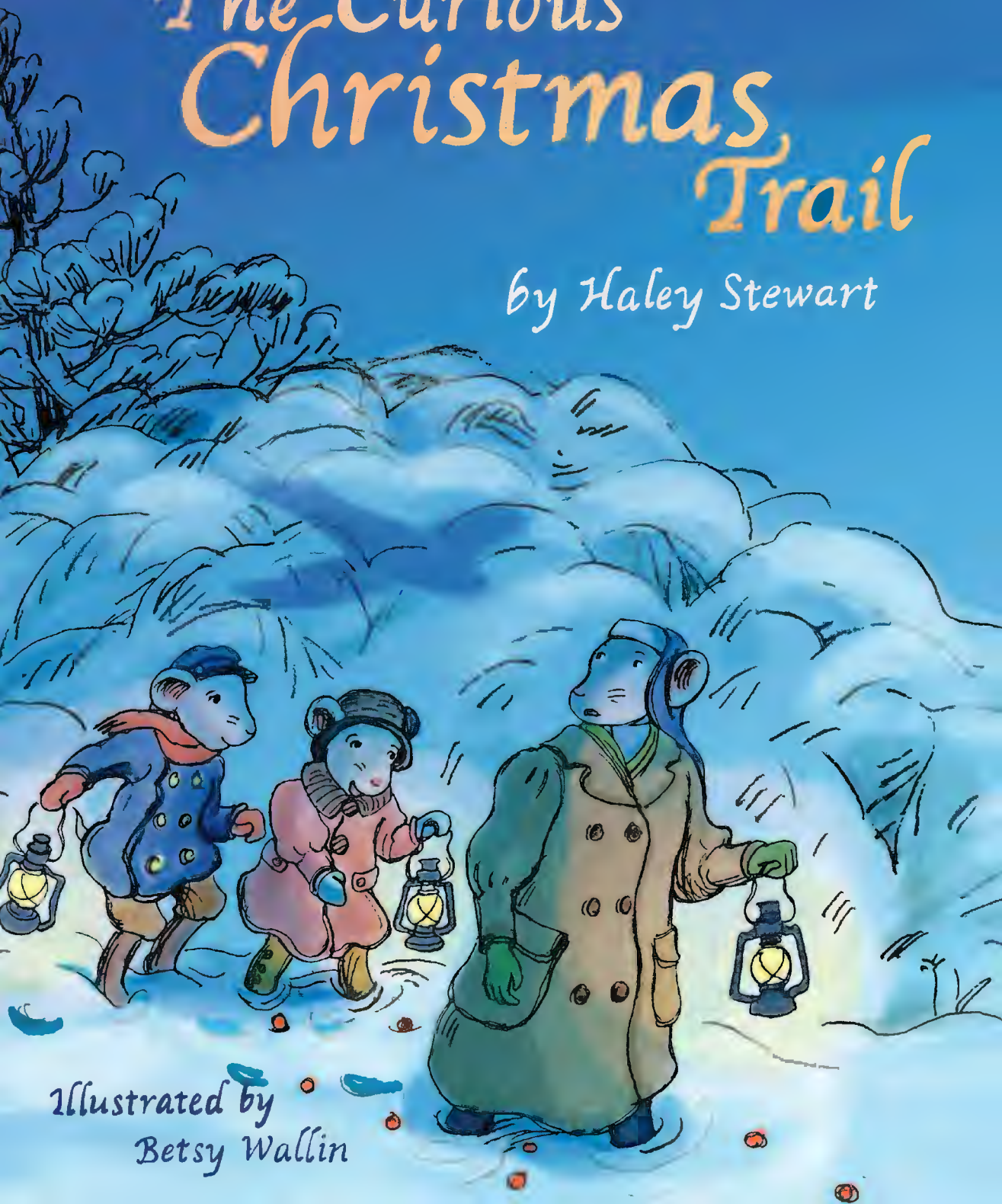


THE SISTER SERAPHINA MYSTERIES

The Curious Christmas Trail

by Haley Stewart



Illustrated by
Betsy Wallin

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For Finn S. and Ariana M.





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The Water Cycle



Chapter One

Paper Snowflakes and Christmas Preparations

“These are the only snowflakes I’ve seen so far this winter,” complained Marigold Mouseweather with a sigh. She turned her square of white paper to make another cut with her scissors before unfolding it to reveal an intricate paper snowflake.

“That’s your best snowflake yet, Goldie!” said her best friend, Dominic Whiskerbright. “Don’t worry. It’s going to snow before Christmas. I can feel it!” he said, closing his eyes and balling up his fists as if by wishing very hard he could make the snow fall outside their classroom window.

Goldie laughed at his theatrics and then gasped when she noticed the piles of paper scraps building up under Dom’s desk. “Well, it certainly looks like it snowed in here,” she giggled. “You made a blizzard!”

Dom wasn’t the only student who had made a mess with his Christmas craft on the last day of school before the holidays. As busy students’ scissors were flying, little white patches of paper were scattered all over the classroom floor.

Sister Alberta, their science teacher, was trying to explain how snowflakes form when water crystallizes, but it was hard to hear her over the



cheerful din. She seemed not to notice that her robin's-egg-blue habit was dotted with little bits of white paper.

The mice of Saint Wulfhilda's School were usually rather orderly, but everyone was so excited about the holidays that the classroom was in chaos with loud, happy voices.

Terence Whistletop lost his head and began dancing on his desk, giving a rousing performance of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemice."

At that moment, the students' calm and collected literature teacher, Sister Seraphina, poked her head in the door.

"Sister Alberta, class has been over for ten minutes—it's time for the students to be dismissed to rehearsal with Sister Gertrude!" she said.

She caught the other teacher in the middle of a sentence about water molecules. "Oh my! We didn't hear the bell, Sister Seraphina! Everything is at sixes and sevens, I'm afraid. We were making snowflakes for tomorrow's Nativity Play decorations and things got a bit . . . out of hand." Sister Alberta looked around the room and took in the mess.

Goldie and Dom tried not to laugh, but frazzled Sister Alberta looked like she had been out in a snowstorm. She was covered in white paper scraps and her hem was picking up more and more of them as she bumped around the classroom, trying to set things right but knocking piles of scrap paper off of the desks instead.



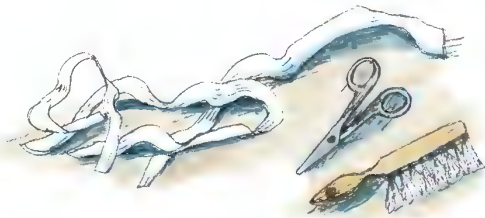
Sister Seraphina looked like she was trying to control a chuckle as well. She said with a soothing smile, “Not to worry, Sister Alberta. Why don’t you walk the class to the rehearsal for the Nativity Play, and I’ll just tidy up here for you?” She brushed some of the stray paper bits off of Sister Alberta’s habit kindly and suggested, “Perhaps Goldie and Dom could stay behind a moment and help me sweep up?”

“Right you are, Sister!” replied a relieved Sister Alberta. “Let’s line up, children!” she said cheerfully. “Rehearsal is beginning momentarily! I’ll let Sister Gertrude know that you are arriving presently, Dom and Goldie, but try to hurry as best you can. You know Sister Gertrude. She runs a tight ship!”

“Yes, Sister! We’ll be quick as a flash!” Dom assured her, before the excited class skipped down the corridor following Sister Alberta.

The Sisters of Our Lady Star of the Sea (the Stella Marisians) who ran Saint Wulfhilda’s School were known for their bright blue habits and their annual Nativity Play and Christmas feast that followed Mass on Christmas Eve. The preparations for these celebrations were always times of hustle and bustle.

Goldie grabbed the dustpan, and the mice quickly got to work clearing paper scraps into the bin. “Of course,” she noted, “Dom and I are hardly





necessary to the play, Sister Seraphina. We won't be missed at rehearsal. He's a shepherd, and I'm just one of the angels."

"Oh, Goldie, *everyone* is necessary in the Christmas story!" Sister Seraphina said as she carefully gathered up the finished snowflakes and stacked them neatly. "Imagine if there were no angels and no shepherds to spread the word about Baby Jesus and to adore him! What a bleak Christmas it would be."

This sort of kind encouragement was exactly why Sister Seraphina was Goldie's favorite teacher at Saint Wulfhilda's. She was always so calm. Goldie thought that if she ever became a teacher, she would want to be just like Sister Seraphina.

"I suppose you're right, Sister," Goldie admitted. "But it's not as if I'm Mary or Dom's one of the Wise Men." She turned away to dump the

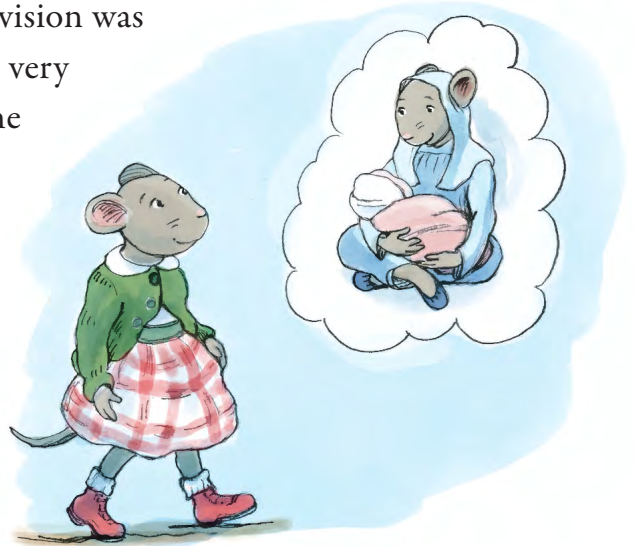
bits of shredded paper into the bin and mumbled, “They could do the Nativity Play without us.”

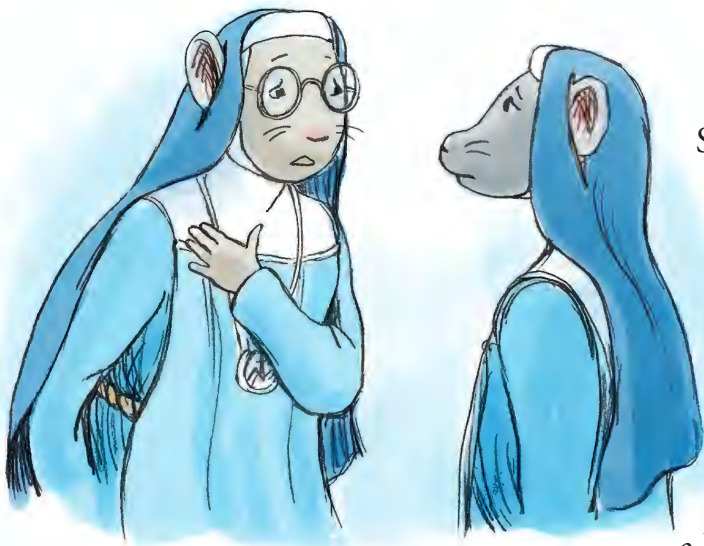
“Well, I, for one, am glad they won’t have to,” said their teacher, brushing the last mound of paper scraps into her paw and looking around the classroom with a satisfied air. “I love seeing both your faces on the stage each year.”

Goldie had to admit that she was a bit disappointed to be an angel . . . again. She had been an angel for three years in a row. Of course, angels *were* a step up from sheep (the role of the youngest students at Saint Wulfhilda’s School). She felt silly to think it, and didn’t want to say it aloud, but she had dreamed that this year . . . maybe, just maybe, she would be Mary. But Sister Gertrude had picked Dilly Cornflower. *Dilly is a nice mouse, but she doesn’t exactly have dramatic flair*, Goldie thought to herself, a bit peevishly.

As they set off for rehearsal, Goldie was imagining what it would be like if *she* were Mary in the Nativity Play, wearing a beautiful veil and serenely holding Baby Jesus. Her vision was suddenly interrupted by a very anxious Mother Alphonsa, the abbess of Saint Wulfhilda’s, running down the corridor.

Mother Alphonsa halted when she saw them and put her hand on her chest as she caught her breath. “Sister





Seraphina, have you seen Sister Dymphna?” the abbess asked in a worried voice.

Sister Seraphina looked at her in dismay. Goldie knew that Sister Dymphna was the oldest nun at Saint Wulfhilda’s, and lately she had a habit of disappearing.

“Why, no, Mother! She’s not in the kitchen with Sister Catherine? You know how she likes her tea by the warmth of the stove. Sometimes when I can’t find her, she’s sitting right there.”

“I’ve checked, Sister! I’m afraid she’s wandered off again! Oh, this is becoming almost a daily occurrence. I’m quite concerned!” groaned the abbess.

“We saw her in the garden at recess, Mother Alphonsa!” piped up Dom. “I asked her what she was doing out in the cold, because I know she hasn’t been well lately. She said she was looking for holly berries to make a Christmas wreath.”

Mother Alphonsa sighed with relief. “Oh, that’s very helpful, Dom. She probably got wrapped up in that little project and forgot to come in for tea. I’ll go fetch her straight away.”

Just as the abbess said this, they heard a soft voice humming a Christmas carol in the corridor. They turned to see Sister Dymphna, trailing holly berries that were falling out of the apron of her habit where she had them gathered up.

“Oh, Sister!” said Mother Alphonsa, rushing over to her. “You gave us quite a fright. Let’s get you warmed up with a spot of tea, shall we? Remember, Doctor Scurry says you mustn’t be out in the cold.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the elderly nun, looking confused. “I was just getting ready for Christmas, Mother Hildegard.”

Dom looked at Goldie quizzically. *Mother Hildegard?* She was talking to Mother Alphonsa. Why had she used the wrong name?

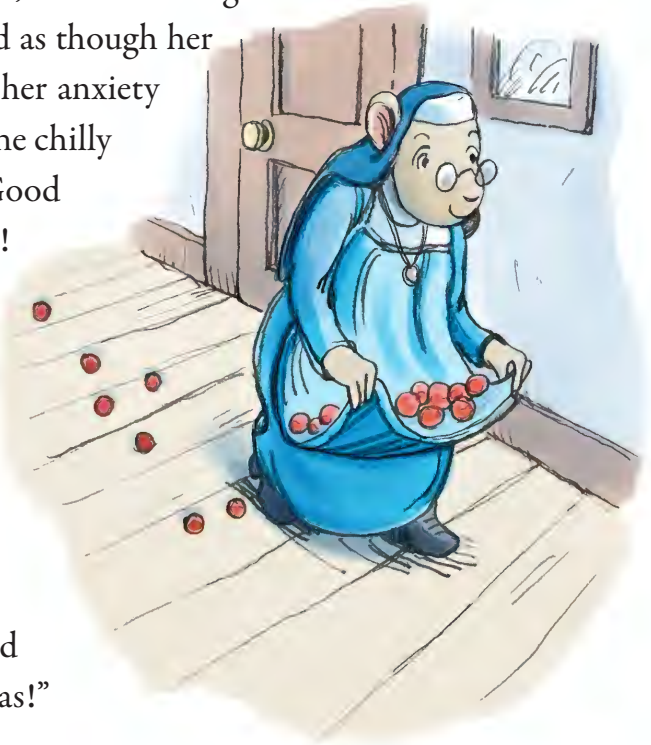
“I went out for some holly berries to decorate wreaths. I do love Christmas,” said Sister Dymphna, grinning at Goldie and Dom.

“I do, too, Sister,” Dom grinned back.

“Yes, we all do, Sister Dymphna, now off we go!” said Mother Alphonsa, who sounded as though her nerves were still a bit strained from her anxiety over the missing sister. She ushered the chilly senior mouse to the warm kitchen. “Good luck at rehearsal, Dom and Goldie! I know you’ll make us proud as always!”

“Poor Sister Dymphna,” said Sister Seraphina as she escorted Dom and Goldie to rehearsal. “She seems to be getting more and more confused these days.”

“She even seemed to be confused about who Mother Alphonsa was!”



added Dom. “She called her Mother Hildegard, and *she* was abbess ages and ages ago! Before Goldie and I were even born!”

“Yes, Dom. Mother Hildegard was abbess when Sister Dymphna arrived at the abbey as a young mouse. Doctor Scurry says Sister Dymphna’s confusion may get much worse, and she will have trouble remembering names. But I’m quite alarmed at this tendency to wander off. She’s quite frail, and I don’t want her to get ill from the cold.” Sister Seraphina pursed her lips in worry. “We will just have to keep a closer eye on Sister Dymphna and make sure she’s safe.”

Just before they walked into the rehearsal room, Dom had an idea. “Maybe Goldie and I could help her with her Christmas wreaths after rehearsal,” he suggested eagerly.

Sister Seraphina stopped and patted him on the shoulder. “Dom, you are quite the problem solver! And that is a very thoughtful idea. Sister Dymphna loves children, and she’s missed teaching so much since she retired from the classroom. I think she would enjoy that a great deal. And it would help us if she had company while we are busy setting things up for the Nativity Play and the Christmas feast tomorrow. Now hurry along into rehearsal, or I’ll be in trouble with Sister Gertrude! She runs a—”



“—tight ship!” Goldie and Dom interrupted, giggling, as they rushed into the hall where they held the Nativity Play each Christmas Eve.

“There you are, Marigold Mouseweather and Dominic Whiskerbright! How can we have a play without all of our actors? In your places, quick as you can!” urged Sister Gertrude, a straw-colored mouse with the intensity of a military general. Sister Seraphina winked at Goldie and Dom. She passed Goldie the stack of snowflakes they had made in class, then headed quickly back down the corridor.



