

Introduction

You take a deep breath, about to blow out the candles on your birthday cake. Clutching a coin in your fist, you get ready to toss it into the dancing waters of a fountain. You stare at your little brother as you each hold the end of a dried wishbone, about to pull. But what do you do first?

You make a wish, of course!

Ever wonder what happens right after you make that wish? *Not much*, you may be thinking.

Well, you'd be wrong.

Because something quite unexpected happens next. Each and every wish that is made becomes a glowing Wish Orb, invisible to the human eye. This undetectable orb zips through the air and into the heavens, on a one-way trip to the brightest star in the sky—a magnificent place called Starland. Starland is inhabited by Starlings, who look a lot like you and me, except they have a sparkly glow to their skin, and glittery hair in unique colors. And they have one more thing: magical powers. The Starlings use these powers to make good wishes come true, for when good wishes are granted, it results in positive energy. And the Starlings of Starland need this energy to keep their world running.

In case you are wondering, there are three kinds of Wish Orbs:

- 1) **GOOD WISH ORBS.** These wishes are positive and helpful and come from the heart. They are pretty and sparkly and are nurtured in climate-controlled Wish-Houses. They bloom into fantastical glowing orbs. When the time is right, they are presented to the appropriate Starling for wish fulfillment.
- 2) **BAD WISH ORBS.** These are for selfish, mean-spirited, or negative things. They don't sparkle

at all. They are immediately transported to a special containment center, as they are very dangerous and must not be granted.

- 3) IMPOSSIBLE WISH ORBS. These wishes are for things like world peace, curing diseases, and unattainable requests that simply can't be granted by Starlings. These sparkle with an almost impossibly bright light and are taken to a special area of the Wish-House with tinted windows to contain the glare they produce. The hope is that one day they can be turned into good wishes the Starlings can help grant.

Starlings take their wish granting very seriously. There is a special school, called Starling Academy, that accepts only the best and brightest young Starling girls. They study hard for four years, and when they graduate, they are ready to start traveling to Wishworld to help grant wishes. For as long as anyone can remember, only graduates of wish-granting schools have ever been allowed to travel to Wishworld. But things have changed in a very big way.

Read on for the rest of the story. . . .

Prologue

TOP SECRET HOLO-COMMUNICATION

(Warning: This memorandum will disappear
five seconds after it has been read.)

TO: The Star Darlings Guest Lecturers

Professor Margaret Dumarre

Professor Dolores Raye

Professor Illumia Wickes

Professor Elara Ursa

Professor Lucretia Delphinus

Professor Eugenia Bright

cc: Lady Cordial, Director of Admissions

FROM: Lady Stella, Headmistress

RE: Star Darlings Update

To All:

I am writing to inform you that Operation Star Darlings is up and running! My theory—that young Starlings granting the wishes of young Wishlings would result in a greater amount of wish energy—is correct.

However, I have both good and bad news. The good news is that the mission was successful and we collected a significant amount of wish energy. The bad news is there was a glitch in initial Wisher identification and the amount of wish energy that was collected was not quite as large as we had anticipated.

What have we learned from this? It is clear we must continue to diligently support and train our Star Darlings so that the remaining eleven missions go seamlessly and we will be able to collect the most wish energy possible.

When will the next mission happen and who will be chosen? Only time will tell. But I am cautiously optimistic that Operation Star Darlings will be a success.

Thank you for your help. And your continued discretion.

Starfully yours,
Lady Stella

The background of the page is a soft, pink watercolor wash. There are several small, white, five-pointed stars scattered throughout the design, particularly in the upper and lower portions. The overall aesthetic is gentle and dreamy.

CHAPTER 1

The first thing Libby noticed when she blinked awake was the delightful scent that permeated her dorm room. She sat up in bed and inhaled the perfumed air.

“Smells amazing, doesn’t it?” asked Gemma.

Libby looked over at her roommate lying in bed across the room. Gemma’s bright orange hair, messy from sleep, formed a wild halo around her head as she lay there, sniffing deeply. The two girls turned their attention to the vase of coral-colored flowers that had been waiting for them in their dorm room when they returned from dinner the evening before.

“I still can’t figure out what kind of flowers they are,” said Libby. “I don’t recognize them, but they smell

just like blushbelles.” Blushbelles were her favorite flower. They were pink, released puffs of sparkling stardust, and had a sweetly spicy scent that she thought was simply the loveliest smell on all of Starland.

“Blushbelles?” Gemma snorted. “What are you talking about?” she said. “It smells like orange-and-vanilla ice pops—just like chatterbursts. I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation!” She gave Libby a quiz-zical look.

Libby liked to keep the peace. She usually carefully weighed her words before she spoke. But for some reason, she sat up in bed and heard herself say, rather forcefully, in fact, “You’re crazy.”

Gemma blinked in surprise. “No, *you’re* crazy,” she retorted. “You’re as crazy as a bloombug.” Libby gave her roommate an annoyed look. Bloombugs were small purple-and-pink spotted bugs that went wild every time there was a full moon during the warmer months of the Time of Lumiere, hopping up and down and squealing with delight at the warmer weather and longer daylight hours the season brought. Gemma sniffed. “Well, no matter how crazy you are, you have to admit that this is the sweetest thing you’ve ever . . .”

Her voice trailed off as she noticed that Libby had pulled her soft pink blanket over her head, obviously

ignoring her. Gemma threw back the covers and nimbly hopped out of bed. She opened her closet and grabbed her bathrobe. “I call first stars on the sparkle shower!” she cried.

Libby sighed. Gemma had called first stars on the sparkle shower every day that week. They were supposed to take turns. She removed the covers and took a deep, calming breath. Then another for good measure. She smiled, feeling much better. There. No reason to get annoyed. She and Gemma were the perfect roommates, the envy of all the other Star Darlings. They got along well, accepting each other’s idiosyncrasies, easily working through any issues that came up, and never letting resentments get in the way of their respect and affection for each other. Sure, Gemma had a mercurial personality, and Libby sometimes had difficulty making even the smallest decision without carefully weighing the pros and cons (deciding what to order for dinner sometimes required the thought process others reserved for major life decisions). But they had similar live-and-let-live personalities that served them both well. So it really confounded Libby that she was feeling irked that morning. And over something as silly as a vase of flowers that would probably be wilted by the afternoon!

Libby yawned and stretched. She slipped her feet

into a pair of fluffy pink slippers and shuffled to the mysterious bouquet of flowers, which was sitting on her pink desk, exactly where the two roommates had discovered it the night before to their delight and surprise.

She leaned over and took a deep sniff. She shook her head. The smell was actually more spicy than sweet, in her estimation. Just like blushbelles, no question about it. Maybe Gemma was teasing her. She sighed with happiness as she surveyed her half of the double room. She, like all incoming students at Starling Academy, had filled out an extensive questionnaire about her dorm room preferences. The results were spectacular. Her half of the room was pink, pink, and more pink as far as the eye could see, just as she had requested, from the round bed, with its padded fabric headboard, to the sumptuous rug, recessed wall lights, desk/vanity, and sparkling crystal chandelier. (The lovely white lacquered dresser with spindly legs that stood in the corner was the sole nonpink touch.) And the wide, low pink table was surrounded by luxurious floor cushions. It was the perfect place for friends to gather, and Libby often invited her classmates over to hang out during their free time.

Luckily, Gemma was very social and fun-loving, too. But on the occasional day that she wasn't in the mood for

company, she would just draw the starry curtain that ran along the middle of the room, climb into bed, and read or listen to music. But she could usually be coaxed to join in when the conversation got too good to ignore.

Gemma stepped into the room. Her skin glimmered, covered in a fresh layer of sparkles from her shower. Star Darlings were born with glittery skin and hair, but a daily sparkle shower helped keep them as luminous as possible. Libby headed in next, and the sparkle shower, invigorating and refreshing, cleared her mind and improved her mood. She applied her toothlight, first to the top row, then to the bottom. Starlings used their toothlights twice a day, in the morning and the evening, to keep their teeth as clean, white, and sparkly as could be.

Libby put her toothlight back in the mirrored cabinet, closed it, and stared at her reflection for a moment, taking in her long pink hair, alabaster skin, rose-colored eyes, and dimpled chin. She smiled at her reflection and headed back into the other room. She found Gemma sitting on her bed, tying her yellow shoelaces. She had put on an orange mesh three-quarter-length-sleeved shirt over an orange tank top and matching capri pants and pulled her hair into two cute pigtails. She looked effortlessly hip, as always. As soon as she spotted Libby, she launched right

back into the conversation, as though no time had passed. “So wouldn’t you agree that they are the most delicious-smelling flowers ever? I mean, I have never smelled anything so sweet in my entire life. No lie. Have you?”

Libby had indeed smelled something sweeter. For her sixth birthday, her parents had taken her and eleven of her closest friends on a behind-the-scenes private tour of the Floffenhooper Candy Factory. The very air in the jellyjobble processing room had nearly knocked her over with its fruity deliciousness. Just thinking about it made her mouth water. “Well, once I went on a—”

“Come to think of it, we had an orchard of goldenella trees on the farm,” Gemma continued, as if she had never asked Libby her opinion. “You know, the kind that bloom nonstop for one week straight, and the flowers pop off the tree just like popcorn. When they bloomed, Tessa and I would just drop to the ground and roll around in the flowers. The smell was intoxicating! They positively carpeted the grass.” She shook her head. “But even that was nothing like this delicious fragrance.” She sniffed again.

“Well, I once—” Libby tried again.

“And when I call it a carpet of flowers, I am talking wall-to-wall,” Gemma pressed on. “Nothing but lemon-yellow blossoms as far as the eye could see. And

they didn't fade at all. It looked like a sea of sunshine. I remember one time when Tessa and I decided to . . .”

Libby, who usually listened with pleasure to Gemma's stories, found herself tuning out. Gemma's older sister, Tessa, was a third-year student and also a Star Darling. The sisters had been raised on a farm far out in the countryside, in a place called Solar Springs. There wasn't even a real town nearby, Gemma had told her, just a dusty old general store, where they did their very occasional shopping. They grew nearly everything they needed on the farm. Libby, who'd had a completely different upbringing in Starland City, had heard countless stories about their life and thoroughly enjoyed each one. It was such a different existence from hers, and she found it quite fascinating. And Gemma loved to talk about it. She liked to talk in general, actually. When she was in the mood, she could talk all day long, from the moment she woke up to when she went to bed. Libby had even been woken up in the middle of the night by Gemma talking in her sleep! But Libby had just laughed, rolled over, and gone back to bed. The truth was that Libby loved a good discussion and relished a friendly argument. But for some reason she was not enjoying it that day.

Libby finished getting dressed in a pink dress with

star-shaped pockets and white tights embroidered with pink stars. She hung her Wish Pendant, a necklace that resembled a constellation of golden stars, around her neck and fastened the clasp. Her signature look was sweetly stylish. She stood in front of the mirror in her closet, brushing her long pink hair. The exact shade of cotton candy and jellyjooles, it rippled down her back. Her silky, flowing rosy-hued hair was her secret pride.

“So who do you think sent us the flowers?” Gemma asked. “There wasn’t a holo-card. Why would anyone be so mysterious? If you’re sending such a nice gift, you’d think you’d want to get credit for it. That reminds me of the time I—”

“That’s a good question,” interrupted Libby. She sifted through the evidence. Neither of them recognized the glittery flowers, so they must be rare (and, most likely, expensive). Receiving them had been a pleasant, unexpected surprise. And anything rare, beautiful, thoughtful, or extravagant in Libby’s life always came from one place. “My parents must have sent them,” she said with a smile. “They love surprises.” *Especially expensive ones*, she thought.

Gemma, who was the secondary beneficiary of many a care package from Libby’s parents, Erica and Miles, nodded. “Hey! I think you’re right!” she exclaimed.

As if on cue, Libby's holo-phone rang and an image of her mother, drumming her fingers impatiently on the Starcar's dashboard, was projected in the air. She hesitated because she wasn't sure she felt like talking to her mom at the moment, but she accepted the call with a swipe of her hand.

"Sweetheart!" said her mother, appearing as a live hologram in front of Libby. She was sitting next to Libby's father on their way to work. Libby's parents worked hard as investment bankers at a large firm and liked to enjoy the best life had to offer, showering their daughter with pricey gifts and one-of-a-kind experiences. Of course these rare fragrant blooms had come from them!

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad!" said Libby.

Gemma popped her head into the frame. "Hi, there!" she shouted.

Libby's dad put down his holo-reader and smiled. "Hello, girls. How's school?" he asked.

"Fine," said Libby, not looking at Gemma. It was a weird feeling not to be able to share everything that was going on at school with her mom and dad. But the Star Darlings had to keep their new duties top secret, even from their parents. Libby changed the subject quickly. "So we got the flowers you sent. They're beautiful. Thanks a lot."

“Yeah, thank you!” Gemma called out. “We love them.”

Libby’s mom looked confused. “Flowers? We didn’t send you any flowers,” she said. She turned to her husband. “Miles, we should have sent the girls flowers! That’s such a nice idea!”

“Well, how about some glimmerchips?” offered Libby’s dad. “We could send you a case or two.”

“Yes, please,” said Gemma automatically. She had never tasted the thin, crispy, salty, and, yes, glimmery chips before she had started at Starling Academy, and she had developed quite a taste for them.

Libby shook her head. “We’re fine, Daddy.” She still had an unopened case under her bed. “But thank you.”

“Starsweetie, the actual reason I called, besides to say hello, is to discuss your upcoming mid-Time of Shadows break,” Libby’s mother explained, pulling up a holo-calendar in the air in front of her. Libby could see that it was already packed with events and plans. Her parents always had a very full social calendar. “Daddy and I were thinking we’d go to Supernova Island. Or maybe Glamora-ora,” she said, naming two exclusive vacation destinations. The holidays were still a ways off, but Libby’s parents were so busy they had to schedule everything months in advance.

Gemma's eyes were wide. "Wow," she mouthed, stunned into uncustomary silence. Her parents didn't like to leave the farm for more than a couple of hours at a time, so the sisters always spent their holidays at home.

Libby twirled a piece of her pink hair around her finger, a grimace on her face. She hated disappointing her parents. This wasn't going to be easy.

"That's not an attractive look, my dear," said her mother. "Is something wrong?"

"I . . . uh . . . was talking to Aunt Kit about joining her on a volunteering vacation during break," Libby explained. "We're thinking of traveling from city to city, helping out at different orphanages and animal shelters. And I might even be able to get some credits for school." Aunt Kit and Libby's mom were sisters, but they couldn't have been more different. Libby adored her mother, but she had so much more in common with the young, altruistic Kit, who loved helping others even more than she enjoyed traveling—which was saying a lot.

The matching looks of dismay on her parents' faces would have been funny if they hadn't been so disconcerting to Libby. It was painful for her to disappoint anyone, particularly her generous and kind parents. But you'd think she had told them she wanted them to take her camping on the Isle of Misera, a barren, rocky,

uninhabitable island off the coast of New Prism. Libby sighed. The problem was that her parents just didn't get her.

Until Libby was ten years old, she had been unaware that she lived an exceptional life. She hadn't given a second thought to any of it—the huge sprawling mansion in the fanciest neighborhood in Starland City, Starland's largest metropolis; the exclusive vacations; the closetful of expensive clothes and shoes and accessories; any toy she desired, plus many more she hadn't even realized she had wanted until she received them. All that changed one day when she was off from school. The family's housekeeper was away, so little Libby's parents took her to work with them. She was playing in the conference room with her newest toy, an exclusive child-sized doll that could have full conversations on any subject with its owner, when a little girl walked in. She was the daughter of the building's janitor and she was totally fascinated with Libby's doll. When Libby asked the girl if she had one just like it at home, she was shocked to hear that the girl didn't own a doll of any kind. Libby was dubious. Was that even possible? The girl explained that her parents didn't have money for unnecessary things. Libby felt terrible. "Take it, it's yours," she said to the girl. The look of pure joy on the girl's face staggered Libby. The feeling she got from

giving was much better than the happiness she got from receiving. She went home that night and took a good look around her. Meeting the girl had really opened her eyes to her privileged existence and the joy she could bring others with her generosity.

Libby had started small, donating the toys she didn't play with to a children's hospital. Her parents were amused, calling her "our little philanthropist." But when Libby next gave away every other toy she owned, and then asked for donations to her favorite charity instead of gifts on her Bright Day, they began to object. They especially did not appreciate it when she questioned their lavish lifestyle, which they felt they deserved, as they had earned it through their hard work.

Libby's mother spoke first. "That's our Libby, always thinking about others," she said. Libby perked up. Maybe they were starting to see her point of view. . . .

"And never about us!" her parents said together.

No such luck. Libby felt her spirits deflate like a punctured floating star globe.

"The choice is yours, my love," said her father sadly. "But we were looking forward to spending some quality time relaxing together, like we always do on vacation."

Libby was careful not to smile, as she could recall many family holidays when she was left to her own devices

while her parents took their daily holo-conference calls. Her parents didn't really know how to relax.

"Well, we've arrived," announced Libby's dad in the fake cheerful voice Libby knew all too well. The car would drop them off at the building's entrance, then park itself in their designated parking space.

"Bye, Mom and Dad, talk soon," said Libby, rushing off the phone. She was glad to be out of the starlight, but she still felt a lump in her throat as her parents signed off, about to begin another day of acquisitions and mergers. Or whatever it was they did all day.

She stood there for a moment. She was glad that Gemma understood that she needed a moment to collect her—

"Well," said Gemma. "That didn't go over so well. What are you going to do? Me, I guess I would just go to—"

Libby whirled around to face her roommate, about to give her a piece of her mind.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

CHAPTER 2

Eager to work on their energy manipulation skills, both girls tried to open the door at the same time, using their powers of concentration. This resulted in a stand-off, since neither was particularly good at it yet. The door slid open an inch, then closed, then repeated the same motion several times. The visitor knocked again, louder. “Let me in!” a voice called out impatiently.

Finally, Libby backed off and allowed Gemma to do the honors. Gemma concentrated with all her might, her face turning quite red with the effort. The door slid open haltingly, and their visitor stepped inside.

It was Scarlet. “You guys might want to think about working on your energy manipulation a bit more,” she said. As a third-year student, she had more practice with it and was much better than they were.

“Oh, hey, Scarlet,” Gemma said casually. But Libby could tell that her roommate was a little nervous. Libby couldn’t blame her: Scarlet, with her intense punk-rock look and matching attitude, was pretty intimidating. She could be standoffish, intense, and mysterious—so much so that Libby had gone out of her way to avoid her in the beginning of the school year. But then, one day, feeling blue, she had curled up in the Luminous Library to read one of her favorite holo-books from childhood and looked up to discover that both she and Scarlet were deeply engrossed in *The Starling’s Surprise*. They’d had a good laugh about it, then bonded over the common bout of homesickness that had led to the book selection. (Scarlet had sworn Libby to secrecy; she had a reputation to uphold!) Libby had realized that when you got to know her, Scarlet could also be kind and fun. But Gemma was not yet convinced. “Whatever you say,” Gemma had said when Libby tried to explain it to her. “But until she’s kind and nice to *me*, I just won’t believe it.” The rest of the Star Darlings, especially Leona, Scarlet’s roommate, all seemed to feel the same way.

“Hey, I thought I’d stop by to see if you wanted to walk to the Celestial Café together,” Scarlet said. She looked around her. “I forgot how nice your room is,” she

said, nodding. “It kind of reminds me of a beautiful sunset.” Gemma smiled despite herself. Libby looked at the room as if through Scarlet’s eyes. The girl was right. The lighting—soft pink on Libby’s side and cheerful orange on Gemma’s—combined in the middle of the room to create a rosy glow that was warm and cozy. The two girls definitely had different tastes, but their furnishings fit together nicely. Libby was a bit neater, her bed always made and her belongings stowed away. Gemma had a lot of stuff for her many interests—musical instruments, holo-books on almost every subject you could think of, stuffed animals, crafting supplies, flora she had collected on nature hikes, a variety of sporting equipment—and it was all crammed onto her floor-to-ceiling shelves.

The other Star Darlings’ rooms were not quite so harmonious. Sage and Cassie, also first-year students, had a room that was a study in complete opposites—one side austere and the other quite cluttered. The room that second-years Piper and Vega shared was neat as a pin, in soothing shades of blue and green, but the similarity ended there. Piper’s side was soft and dreamy, with soothing curved surfaces, lots of pillows, and stacks of dream journals, while Vega’s felt angular, clean, and precise. Clover and Astra’s room was a jarring combination

of sporty and sleek. And over in the Big Dipper Dorm, Tessa and Adora's jumbled room reflected their dueling interests in science experiments and cooking. You never wanted to pick up a glass that wasn't handed specifically to you: it could be a tasty smoothie, but there was an equal chance that it could be a putrid-tasting potion nobody in her right mind would want to ingest.

And then there were Scarlet and Leona. Their room was as discordant as their relationship. Leona was as bright, flashy, and in your face as her side of the room, with its warm golden glow, stage for impromptu shows, and desk shaped like a vanity surrounded by bright lightbulbs. Scarlet's space was designed so she could skateboard down its walls. It was certainly an interesting room. But Libby didn't feel truly comfortable there. Too much tension between the two roommates, maybe.

"Hey!" said Scarlet, spotting the bouquet. "You got those flowers, too! And so did Tessa and Adora, down the hall from me. They must be from Lady Stella, don't you think?" She took a deep sniff. "Aren't they amazing? They smell just like punkypows."

Libby and Gemma stared at each other. Now that was very odd!

Scarlet sat down on Libby's pristine pink bedding.

“So when I came out of the sparkle shower this morning, what do you think I found?”

“A hungry gليون, eating your flowers,” offered Gemma. Libby knew her roommate was trying to be funny, but nobody laughed.

Scarlet gave Gemma her patented disdainful look, and Gemma, embarrassed, immediately busied herself with her Star-Zap.

“Nooo . . .” Scarlet drew the word out scornfully. “I found my roommate wearing my grandfather’s top hat, that’s what,” she said. “Again! And again I told her to keep her hands off it. I remind her all the time that it’s special, not to be worn, ever, and as usual, she just ignores me.” She scowled. Before Scarlet’s grandfather had completed his Cycle of Life, he had been the greatest and most famous magician Starland had ever known. He had been known as Preston the Prestidigitator, and Starlings had come from near and far to watch him perform. Preston had left his granddaughter his top hat, which Scarlet kept in a glass case, as if it was in a museum. Rumor had it that the end of his life cycle had been staged and that as part of an elaborate trick, he would reappear on his next Bright Day. But Libby was too intimidated to ask Scarlet if it was true.

Scarlet shook her head. “You guys are so lucky, you get along so perfectly. What’s your secret?”

Libby bristled and heard herself say, “We take turns deciding who gets to take the first sparkle shower in the morning.”

Gemma narrowed her eyes at Libby. “We always listen to each other,” she said.

Scarlet didn’t notice the tension between the two girls. “Well, that’s great,” she said. “In any event, I’m hungry. Time for breakfast?”



The Star Darlings tended to sit together in the Celestial Café, at a table by the window overlooking the majestic Crystal Mountains. Libby always tried to grab a seat facing the view. Although Libby was friendly with many of the regular students, she had discovered that it was just easier to spend most of her time with her fellow Star Darlings. You could never let your guard down around the others, in case you accidentally let some top secret information slip. Libby plopped herself down on the seat next to Gemma’s sister, Tessa. Scarlet sat on Libby’s other side, and Gemma sat across from her, next to Tessa’s roommate, Adora.

Tessa turned to them with a grin. “I just ordered the

zoomberry pancakes,” she said. “You should get them, too!”

“Whatever,” said Gemma dismissively. “You know they’re never as good as the ones Dad makes on the farm.”

“I know,” Tessa told her sister sympathetically. “The zoomberries aren’t as fresh. But try them—they’re still pretty good.”

Adora, who sat across from Tessa, rolled her eyes. “Do you think I could sit through one meal without hearing about how much better everything is on the farm?”

Tessa gave her roommate a hurt look.

Libby was surprised to hear Adora’s words. She was usually so calm and collected.

The sisters looked at each other and shrugged. It was nearly impossible to ask the chatty sisters to stop talking about a subject that interested them. And farm-fresh food was one of their favorite subjects.

“May I take your order?” asked the Bot-Bot waiter, hovering by Gemma’s shoulder.

“Hmmm,” she mused. “I’m not sure what I’m in the mood for.”

“I really think you’ll like the starcakes, Sis,” said Tessa. “And you know how important breakfast is.”

“It’s the most important meal of the day,” Gemma

and Tessa said together. They laughed. “You sound like Mom!” they also said in unison.

“I was considering tinsel toast with bitterball preserves,” Gemma said after a moment.

Tessa made a face. “I’m not sure if they put in enough sweetener,” she said. “You know how sour it can be if it’s not made correctly. I’d just go with the pancakes.”

Gemma frowned. “Or how about a bowl of—”

“Enough!” said Adora. “Just order something. It’s not a life-or-death decision. It’s just food, for goodness’ sake!”

Tessa looked puzzled. “Just food?” she said. “Who thinks that?”

Libby watched as Adora stood, walked to the other end of the table, and sat down. Libby was surprised by her unusual behavior. The two sisters didn’t even seem to notice. Or maybe they just didn’t care.

Scarlet nudged her with an elbow. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Adora act like that before,” she said. “She’s always so calm.”

“Me neither,” said Libby.

“Perhaps I could take your order now?” repeated the Bot-Bot waiter politely.

Libby decided to order since Gemma was still

deliberating. “I . . . um . . . oh . . . I guess I’ll have the zoomberry starcakes,” Libby said. “And a glass of Zing.”

“Me too,” said Scarlet.

“And I’ll have the tinsel toast,” Gemma said.

Tessa shook her head. “That’s not going to be enough,” she scolded. “Maybe you’d like a bowl of starberries and cream on the side?” she suggested.

“It’s only going to remind me of Dad’s starberry pie!” said Gemma.

Tessa nodded in sympathy. “You’re right! Dad’s starberry pie with a scoop of lolofruit ice cream,” she said dreamily.

“Mmmmmmmm,” said the sisters in unison.

Scarlet looked at Libby and raised her eyebrows. This was going to be one long meal. . . .