

Cassie Comes Through

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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 an 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, the result is 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 and disease cures, 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



You there, Vega?



I'm here, Cassie. In the maze with Scarlet waiting for you!



???



Didn't you get my holo-text?



That's so weird. I didn't get it. You know I hate that maze, anyway. Can we just talk now?



Sure. I'll add Scarlet.



Hey, Cassie.



Hey, Scarlet! Starkudos on your Wish Mission!



Star salutations! It wasn't easy, that's for sure.



So I just told Scarlet we found out that the flowers that were delivered to the Star Darlings are from the Isle of Misera!



Crazy! No wonder everyone was fighting so much. But I thought that place was off-limits. Who do you think sent them? And why?



That's a very good question. And as a matter of fact, that's not the only strange thing going on at Starling Academy . . .



You mean the way I was kicked out of the group and replaced by Ophelia? And then had to go down to Wishworld to save her stars?



Yes, plus I just finished Vega's crossword puzzle . . .



 Star salutations! I'm impressed! So, what did you think?



It's pretty starmazing!



I had to make some changes and move some answers around to get it to line up so perfectly. I'm glad you enjoyed it!



Um, yeah, it was a startastic layout . . .



but I was talking about the actual content.



I mean, when I saw all those the clues together, it was eye-opening! 



Spit it out, Cassie!



Think about it! Look at 3-Across, 7-Across, and sorry, your mission, too, Vega—everyone has had a problem identifying either her Wisher or the wish. And 10-Across: Leona's private band tryout invite got holo-blasted to the entire school and our top-secret name was revealed. Or how about 8-Down: Leona's Wish Pendant got ruined and she didn't collect any wish energy.



Plus me, Ophelia, the flowers . . .



1) I love, love, love that my puzzle got you thinking, Cassie! 2) Wow. I was only looking at them as puzzle clues. But when you actually read them one after another, it's pretty crazy!



Starzactly.



There is a lot of weird stuff going on, that's for sure. And what about my and Ophelia's deliberately switched grades?



Was that ever proven?



Well, not yet, but . . .



Listen, we need to stay calm. Do you think it could just be a coincidence?



No way!



Well . . . we've been brought together to do something so controversial it has to be kept secret from everyone else at Starling Academy—to collect wish energy on Wishworld before we graduate. I'm afraid that maybe we're being sanitized.



???

-  Okay, now I'm really confused!
-  Darn you, starcorrect! I meant sabotaged!
-  That's terrible! But ... by who?
-  Okay, I don't know how to say this. I know you think I can be paranoid....
-  Um, well, maybe because just yesterday you were convinced that someone stole your starglasses, and they were sitting on top of your head!
-   Okay, so maybe you have a point. But ...
-  Yes?
-  Well, um, what if someone really is out to get us? What better way to do it ...
-  Waiting ...
-  ... than from within? What if it is someone here at Starling Academy? Or even worse ...
-  What could be worse?
-  What if it's one of us ... a Star Darling???
-   I hope you're wrong ...



And if I'm not?



Then there's only one thing to say: Oh, starf.



You said it, Starling.

CHAPTER 1

“Well, there you are, Bitty!” Cassie cooed as her pet glowfur landed on her shoulder and nuzzled her pale cheek. Bitty’s soft pink fur tickled Cassie’s face and made the tiny girl giggle. Cassie smiled at the little creature in the mirror as she finished twisting her long, glimmering pinkish-white hair into a second pigtail bun, fastened it in place with a starpin, and reached up to give the creature a quick tickle. Bitty chirped delightedly and the stars on her golden antennae twinkled. The glowfur rewarded Cassie with the “Song of Contentment.” Cassie, who had heard it many times before, hummed along.

“That’s really pretty,” someone said. Cassie turned around to find her roommate smiling at her. Sage,

freshly gleaming from her sparkle shower, was wrapped in a soft lavender towel that matched her hair and eyes.

Cassie nodded in agreement. “Can you believe that glowfurs have twenty-six distinct songs?” she asked. “And that each glowfur has her own version of each tune? This is one of my favorites. After the ‘Song of Joy’ and ‘Song of Enchantment,’ of course.”

“Yes, I can believe it,” said Sage. “Only because you’ve told me a moonium times!”

Although Cassie’s first impulse was to scowl at Sage, she just rolled her eyes and laughed instead. That was the key to having a pleasant relationship with her roommate. Cassie was beginning to realize that Sage didn’t mean to offend; she just liked to say whatever was on her mind.

Sage opened her closet door with her wish energy manipulation skills and quickly got dressed behind it. When she emerged, she was wearing a loosely woven shimmery sweater over a long sleeveless dress that flickered and changed color as she moved—exhibiting more shades of purple than Cassie knew existed. Cassie preferred to wear more delicate outfits, mostly in white and pale shades of silver and pink, but she appreciated the bold color of Sage’s flowing, comfortable clothes. Sage shook her head in mock seriousness. “Actually, what I

really can't believe is you still haven't gotten caught," she said with a laugh.

"That's because Bitty and I are very careful," said Cassie, smoothing her silvery tunic with the ruffled hem. Bitty took off from Cassie's shoulder and circled the room, still singing her song. Cassie smiled at Sage. "And because I have a very discreet roommate."

Sage nodded from the floor, where she crouched, buckling her sparkly sandals. "I *am* discreet, aren't I?"

"You are," said Cassie. She poured Bitty's daily allotment of Green Globules into a crystal bowl and Bitty zoomed over, her bright blue gossamer wings fluttering madly as they struggled to hold up the weight of her plump little body. She knocked over a pile of holo-books in her rush to enjoy her breakfast. Cassie had read the Starling Academy Student Manual from cover to cover and knew quite well that pets were expressly forbidden to live in the student dormitories. She told herself that she had taken Bitty to school with her because the creature would have been lonely back at her uncle Andreas's mansion. He was away on book tours more often than he was at home. But the truth was that Cassie simply couldn't part with her pet, who had once belonged to Cassie's late mother. When Bitty sang her evening song,

Cassie was reminded that her mother had fallen asleep to the very same tune many staryears ago. It wasn't much, in the grand scheme of things, but it brought her great comfort. So Cassie had packed up Bitty and her various glowfur paraphernalia and successfully smuggled her past the Bot-Bot guards on the first day of school.

But keeping Bitty a secret from her roommate had not been easy. There had been that unpleasant moment when, to avoid suspicion, she had to eat a Green Globule after Sage's nosy little brothers had found a bag of them under her bed. Her face wrinkled up at the distasteful memory. And there had been the time when Sage woke to Bitty's singing and tried to convince Cassie that she and her "stellar voice" needed to join the starchoir. (Cassie's voice was actually quite mediocre, so she had feigned a sore throat, missing tryouts.) But it turned out that Sage had already guessed Cassie's secret and accepted her small and furry extra roommate. Cassie had had another stressful period during the time when she and Sage hadn't been getting along and she had grown nervous that her roommate might turn her in. But Sage had proved to be a loyal roommate, even when the two were bickering.

It was those flowers! thought Cassie, staring at the spot where the vase had sat, its coral blooms fragrant, enticing, and perpetually fresh and dewy. But Cassie

had had a feeling that something was not quite right with them, and her hunches were often correct. There was suddenly a lot of tension in the room, and Cassie had realized that she could just not get along with her roommate. In a moment of impulse, she had grabbed the flowers and tossed them into the vanishing garbage can, and things had returned to normal between them. And then she had convinced Vega that they should bring *her* flowers to the botany lab. They had discovered that the flowers came from the Isle of Misera, a place off-limits to Starlings. But who had sent them? And why? That was still a mystery. Cassie made it her mission to destroy the rest of the flowers, but it wasn't easy. She had tried to explain to the rest of the Star Darlings that the flowers were having a bad effect on them, but everyone had just laughed. She had a theory that the longer someone kept the flowers, the more attached to them that person became, so she'd had to get creative. On her fingers, she ticked off the roommate pairs who no longer had flowers in their rooms. Vega and Piper's flowers were still sealed in the botany lab, awaiting more testing. She had tossed Gemma and Libby's when they were in the middle of a heated argument over who had forgotten to turn off the sparkle shower. She had only been able to convince Tessa to get rid of the flowers once she told her that

their strong odor interfered with the delicious smells of her baking. And Leona and Ophelia's had simply disappeared. (She still hadn't figured that one out, but at least they were gone.) That left one roommate pair who still had the flowers in their room—Clover and Astra. Cassie needed to get right on that as soon as starpossible.

Sage finished buckling her sandals and walked to the door, her lavender braids gleaming.

“Ready to go to the Celestial Café?” she asked Cassie.

“Ready!” said Cassie. Bitty zoomed in for a kiss on her furry head and began her good-bye song.

Cassie hurried to the door. “Oh, let me,” she begged, so Sage stepped aside. Cassie concentrated on opening the door with her wish energy manipulation skills and the door began to tremble, almost imperceptibly, as if it was trying to decide whether it wanted to be opened or stay closed. A starmin or two later, after Cassie's pale face flushed silver from the effort, the door slid open fluidly.

Cassie grinned and turned to Sage. “You're like my good-luck charm, Sage,” she said. “I wish I was as good in Wish Energy Manipulation class as I am in our room.” She shrugged. “I guess I get stage fright or something.”

Sage nodded and for a starsec Cassie thought she caught a small flicker of a smile on her roommate's face.

But it disappeared as they stepped into the hallway and onto the Cosmic Transporter.

Cassie's stomach grumbled. "I wonder what to order for break—" she started.

"Stop right there!" a voice barked.

Cassie sighed. They were moving along on the Cosmic Transporter and couldn't stop even if they wanted to, for stars' sake. But Sage laughed merrily. "Hurry up, MO-Ʒay!" she cried.

The Bot-Bot guide zoomed after them eagerly. His official name was MO-Ʒ4, but Sage thought that was a little too formal and had settled on the nickname, which he had embraced wholeheartedly. MO-Ʒay had taken an instant starshine to Sage during her orientation tour and had been delighted by anything Sage did or said ever since. Most Bot-Bots acted by the holo-book with a preset vocabulary and a limited range of programmed reactions. But MO-Ʒay was special. He had a personality that was silly and fun, and he often greeted Sage with special jokes and an occasional gift left on her doorstep.

Cassie couldn't help feeling a little envious as MO-Ʒay excitedly told Sage about the morning's sunrise and showed her a holo-vid he had taken of it just for her. Sometimes Cassie wished that she and Bitty could talk, like Sage and MO-Ʒay did. Though she wasn't quite

sure what Bitty would say. Most likely “More Green Globules, please.” Or maybe “Rub my glowbelly for another starhour if you don’t mind.” The only present Bitty had ever given her (besides the gift of music) was a half-eaten Green Globule, left in the toe of a silver slipper. And by the time Cassie had found it, it was as hard as a meteorite. Cassie had tossed it into the vanishing garbage can. She knew exactly what Green Globules tasted like, even at the peak of freshness: horrible.

Still, she wouldn’t trade Bitty for all the wish energy in Starland. She half listened to Sage and Mojo chat away. She smiled, remembering that Sage had initially confided to her that she found MO-J4’s slavish devotion a bit annoying. But then the silvery Bot-Bot had started to grow on her. Sage told Cassie she was used to small annoying creatures, referring to her younger twin brothers, who could be quite a handful. As an only child, and an orphaned one at that, Cassie had nodded in apparent sympathy. But Cassie would actually have liked nothing more than an annoying sibling (or two or even three) to liven things up around her uncle’s quiet home. That was why she liked Starling Academy so much, she realized. It was lively and there was always something going on to keep her entertained. Like that time when Astra had bet everyone that she could do a triple flip off

the starbounce while eating a half-moon pie. It looked like she was going to win the wager when Leona had jumped up and—

Just then she realized that Sage was trying to get her attention. “Cassie!” she was saying, snapping her fingers in Cassie’s face. Cassie blinked. “We haven’t even discussed the new Scarlet situation yet!” she said. “I mean, that was so unexpected. So what do you think about her reinsta—”

Cassie held up her hand. She turned to MO-J4. “I’m going to remind you that everything you hear is strictly confidential,” she told the Bot-Bot. Even though he was extremely devoted to Sage, the Star Darlings couldn’t risk anyone’s—or anybot’s—leaking information about their secret mission.

MO-J4’s eyes flashed as if he was annoyed, or perhaps disappointed, by the request, but he politely nodded. “Certainly, Cassie,” he said smoothly.

Sage nodded solemnly. “So what do you think about Scarlet’s reinstatement?” she asked. “It’s just so strange.”

Cassie frowned and bit her lip. She adored her roommate and completely trusted her, but still . . . She and Scarlet had promised Vega that until they had some more evidence they would keep to themselves their fears about what they thought was going on. No need to

throw everyone else into a tizzy if there was a reasonable explanation for everything, Vēga had argued. Cassie and Scarlet had reluctantly agreed.

“Well, it was certainly a sur—” she finally started.

“I think it’s simply wonderful!” MO-ᶑ₄ exclaimed. “Now the group can get back together and you can win the Battle of the Bands on Starshine Day. Beat that Vīvica, just like she deserves!”

“All right, see you later, MO-ᶑ₄,” she said. They had reached the Celestial Café. The light was shining above the door. Breakfast was ready to be served and another day was about to unfold.

Sage smiled at Cassie. “And our starday begins,” she said. “Hope it’s a good one.”

Cassie tapped her elbows together three times for luck. She herself was hoping for a day filled with more clues. Something strange was going on at Starling Academy; she was almost sure of it. She just needed some tangible proof.

CHAPTER 2

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Clover scolded her roommate. “No star balls at the breakfast table!” She rolled her eyes, turning to the rest of the Star Darlings sitting around the table as if she was an exasperated teacher and Astra a naughty Wée Constellation School student. “She throws that thing around all day long. It never stops. It’s driving me crazy! I wake up in the middle of the night and there she is, tossing that ball!”

“I told you, Coach Geeta said we have to practice as much as we can to prepare for the big game,” retorted Astra, her flaming red hair pulled into two braids. Two matching glittery spots appeared on her cheeks. Cassie knew Astra well enough to know that meant she was getting angry.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean in the Celestial Café!” Clover practically shouted. The rest of the Star Darlings looked at each other uncomfortably. The usually fun-loving Clover was being very rigid, and Astra was being way more stubborn than usual. It wasn’t enjoyable to watch the two butt heads so forcefully. Cassie held her breath as Astra grinned wickedly and tossed the shining orb into the air again, her hands poised to catch it. She made the ball hover in the air over the table for a moment, showing off the skills that made her Starling Academy’s most talented star ball player. Just then a Bot-Bot waiter zoomed in with a breakfast tray.

“Yum!” said Astra, distracted for a moment. “Am I hungry! I had quite a workout this morning!” And Cassie watched in shock as the shining orb crashed down, faster than she thought possible. “Oh, my stars!” said the Bot-Bot in dismay as it hit his tray with a loud smack, sending stacks of steaming starcakes and glasses of glorange juice flying onto the table.

The girls stared at the scattered starcakes and the puddles of glowing glorange juice on the fancy tablecloth. Tessa, who hated to see any food go to waste, quickly snatched up a starcake and took a bite out of one of its perfect five points. Clover looked furious. The rest of the girls exchanged glances. They knew Clover was

overreacting, since the mess immediately disappeared, as messes always did on Starland. “Pardon me,” said the Bot-Bot apologetically as he neatly stacked the plates and zoomed back to the kitchen for a replacement breakfast tray. Cassie nudged Vega’s leg under the table. But the girl didn’t react. Cassie did it again.

“Did you just kick me?” Astra scowled across the table at Clover.

Oops, thought Cassie.

“No, I didn’t!” Clover retorted. “But maybe I should!”

The two girls glared at each other. Cassie noticed that although both their mouths were set in grim lines, there were matching looks of confusion in their eyes. It was as if they couldn’t understand why they were so angry at each other, and they weren’t very happy about it, either.

That’s it, thought Cassie. If there had been any question in her mind about the negative effect of the vases of flowers, it had just been answered. Everyone else was getting along well (with the exception of Leona and Scarlet, who would probably never get along under any circumstances, but that was another story). She, Vega, and Scarlet had to come up with a plan to dispose of the flowers—that starday.

The rest of breakfast went by without incident, and

Cassie leapt up from the table as soon as she took her last bite of astromuffin. She hurried out of the cafeteria, excited to get to her first class of the day—Intro to Wish Identification. Never slowing her pace, she hopped onto the Cosmic Transporter that looped through campus, and she jumped off at Halo Hall. She bounded up the steps and through the large imposing doors, which dwarfed her tiny figure. Although Cassie’s secret Star Darlings lessons had placed her far beyond the rest of the first-year class, and she often found boring the introductory lessons she had to attend to keep up her cover, she was really looking forward to that day’s class. They were going to attempt wish identification on a Starlandian creature. Cassie tapped her elbows together three times for luck, hoping they’d be studying a glion or a galliope, or maybe even a twinkelope. She would love to hear its trumpeting call in person. Being up close with any one of those majestic creatures would really be a thrill, as would trying to figure out what its wish could possibly be. She quickened her pace down the starmarble hallway, toward the wish stellation. She didn’t want to be late.

“Cassie, wait up!”

Now what? thought Cassie as she abruptly stopped, the soles of her silvery ankle boots squeaking on the floor. She turned around impatiently. But her scowl

disappeared. To her starprise, it was Leona pushing through the crowd of students to get to her side. *Imagine that.*

“I need to catch my breath!” Leona gasped, putting her sparkly golden hand to her sparkly golden throat. “You practically ran right out of the Celestial Café. I’ve been chasing you ever since!”

“You look really glowful,” said Cassie appreciatively, taking in the girl’s aura. Leona had been looking decidedly unglimmery ever since her failed mission. That had concerned all the Star Darlings, since Leona was naturally extra golden to begin with.

“Star salutations,” said Leona, holding out a sparkly arm and admiring it. “I’m starting to feel a bit better.”

“I’m glad,” said Cassie, and she really meant it. It felt good to be talking to Leona. Sure, they had been in Star Darlings class together and seated at the Star Darlings’ table at the dining hall, but this was the first time they were talking one-on-one since their argument about Ophelia.

That she and Leona, so different at first glance—very nearly opposites, in fact—had become such fast friends had starprised her. Cassie had initially felt intimidated by the bold, brash third year, never in a moonium staryears dreaming that the two would have anything

in common—or that she would actually enjoy spending time with a girl who seemed always on the lookout for an admiring audience. Cassie had assumed that Leona would be exhausting to be around, but the truth was that Leona's zest for life energized and inspired her. And she learned that Leona had a kind and generous side that was easy to overlook at first glance.

Their unlikely friendship had begun one evening on the way back from dinner shortly after school had started. The Star Darlings were on the Cosmic Transporter heading back to their dormitories. Cassie recalled that Leona was singing a song about the beauty of lightfall, her arms thrown out and her eyes closed. Cassie thought that the girl looked more luminous than anyone else, her golden hair a brilliant halo around her radiant face. She was shocked when Leona had impulsively grabbed her hand at the end of the song. "We're going to the roof," Leona had announced, and before Cassie could argue, she had whisked her into the upperclassman dormitory and up onto the roof deck. Cassie, who had thought she preferred always being in the background, was surprised to discover she enjoyed being in the golden spotlight of Leona's attention. The two girls had lain on lounge chairs well into the night, staring at the magnificently star-studded sky, squealing when they spotted a shooting

star. They pointed out constellations to each other, and when they ran out of names, they made some up. Leona told Cassie all about her family, about how she loved them fiercely but sometimes felt held back by their limited view of the world. And Leona had been the first person at Starling Academy who Cassie had told about her parents, tentatively pointing out their stars, which winked at her as they always did. Leona had known that no words were required at that moment, just a warm hand to hold as they sat in silence and stared into the heavens. The two didn't realize how late it was until they saw how the stars had completely shifted across the sky. Cassie had had to sneak back into her dorm long after lights-out. In fact, she had felt a little thrill of naughtiness when she'd placed her hand on her room's palm scanner and the Bot-Bot voice had said, "Good evening, Cassie," in what she was certain was a disapproving tone.

But her friendship with Leona had practically ground to a halt after the Starling's disastrous mission. While Cassie understood how disappointed Leona was when it was discovered that she had not collected any wish energy, she was surprised when Leona had completely shut down and frozen her out. Instead Leona had chosen to spend time with her new roommate, and Scarlet's replacement as a Star Darling, Ophelia. And once Cassie

had started asking questions about Ophelia—who, everyone agreed, didn't seem to be Star Darlings material at all—Leona had taken great offense. They had pretty much avoided being alone together ever since.

Sure, Cassie felt a slight glimmer of resentment that Leona had dropped her friendship so abruptly, but her delight in seeing her friend looking so much better won out. Leona gave her a blinding megawatt smile and Cassie grinned right back. All right, maybe Leona's smile wasn't *quite* as intense as it had been before all her mission troubles, but it was still pretty dazzling.

Leona slipped her arm through Cassie's. She leaned down as if to tell Cassie a secret. "So can you believe it?" she whispered, her breath tickling Cassie's ear. "You know they moved Ophelia into the Little Dipper Dormitory. Not only did I lose the sweetest roommate ever, but I'm sharing a room with weird old Scarlet again."

"Poor you," said Cassie, feeling a stab of guilt. She was fond of Scarlet—or as fond as anyone could be of the secretive and somewhat strange girl. But her pleasure at being back in Leona's good graces outweighed her loyalty to Scarlet.

"All that black!" Leona groaned. "And the constant skateboarding messing up my beauty sleep. And remember, she plays the *drums* and she always forgets to turn

on the muting switch. And her weird stuff lying around. Globerbeem cases and old meepletile skins. Ugh.” She shuddered with distaste. “Imagine what new oddities she’s collected since I’ve seen her last.” She sighed and made a sad face. “And what’s going to happen to Ophelia? She may not be a Star Darling, but she’s such a sweet Starling.” She gave Cassie a sidelong glance and her eyes widened. “You know something? She’s an orphan, too! But she has no one at all, not like you with your famous uncle to take care of you. As a matter of fact, she grew up in an orphanage in Starland City. She hadn’t made any friends in Starling Academy until she met me. And now she’s all alone again.”

“Oh,” said Cassie. She hadn’t known that about Ophelia. She had been so focused on the wrongness of Ophelia’s being a Star Darling that it hadn’t occurred to her to think about the girl’s feelings. Now all Cassie felt was sympathy for her. No one but a fellow orphan could understand the unspeakable pain of losing both of your parents at a young age. Of feeling so achingly alone, like you belonged to no one, adrift in a world that was suddenly empty and terribly frightening. And the devastating realization that life would never, ever be the same. For a girl who was searching for a place to fit in, being offered the chance to be a part of a secret group

and then having it suddenly taken away must have been devastating.

Cassie swallowed hard. “I . . . I . . . I’ll keep an eye out for her,” she heard herself say.

“And you’ll talk to her, see how she’s doing?” Leona pressed.

Cassie nodded. “I will. Cross my stars and hope to shine.”

“Star salutations,” said Leona. “I’m worried about her. I really am.”

Cassie nodded. “Well, here’s my classroom,” she said. She unlinked her arm from Leona’s and impulsively gave her a quick hug. She tried to step back, but Leona held on for a moment longer than Cassie was expecting.

Leona had missed her. And that was a pretty nice thing to realize.