CHAPTER 1: THE *STING* BABY

 They argued until they were raw. It was *Sting* Season and Linn wanted another child. Bette did not. They’d been going at it for days. Linn kept shifting how far the forks were from the plates, moving the cups; she blew her nose.

“We don’t have time for another child, Linn. Plus, it took us two years to make way for Wrem.” She swiveled to face Linn standing in the kitchen. “Two years of service—for the elders, then for the children, and all the offerings we made of breath and blood and the oaths we gave. And, Linn, even so, only one in every hundred Welcoming Ceremonies bear the fruit of a newborn. That was the only time I ever wished we were a primal couple. They sneeze and *Oops! Look! A baby*.” Bette went on. “But all those offerings weren’t for naught.  He’s here and he’s more than enough.”

Finally, she said, “Linn, give me your eyes, please.” Her wife turned to face her.

Bette whispered, “A Ceremonial baby like Wrem is not something that happens twice in a lifetime.”

Linn stopped moving, looked down, and took a breath. Then, she stumbled through the whole truth as a last resort. “It’s…it’s the Gathering…and…I thought, maybe….”

Bette blanched. “What are you saying?”

“No one would know. I mean, who’s to sayI *didn’t* feel the pull—”

Linn flinched as Bette flicked salt at her and hissed a protection spell. “Take it back right now, woman. You cannot pretend such a thing. The *Sting* baby pulls *you.* You Precinct people. You think the laws are just ‘nice ideas.’ This is *Sting* Season we’re talking about—”

“Yes, but—”

“These laws hold our world together. They are real, energetic forces. *‘No one would know?’*  If no one knew you jumped off a cliff, do you think gravity wouldn’t smash you to the ground anyway?”

“Oh Words, Bette. Why can’t you just…I just want this. I want our family to be bigger by one. I want Wremmy to have a little sister or brother. I can’t help it. For me it’s just as real as gravity, and…” Linn’s shoulders shook as she wept into her hands.

Bette turned away from her and looked out the window at their garden.

“I’m sorry your heart is sore,” she said, “but I can’t see my way into it.”

During *Sting* Season, random beings were drawn into the Ddrymmian forest by an unseen, unknown force, where they coupled in twos and threes, in all kinds of configurations. Normally, faithfulness between couples was held sacred. But for the eleven days of *Sting* Season, it was a time to honor pleasure for its own sake; and anyone could join with anyone. There were no repercussions, no jealousies or hurt feelings; because the same force that drew them into the forest was the one that erased all memory of what happened there, once the season was over.

Another distinctive element of *Sting* Season was its fruit. During the deepest dark of the eleventh night, a small number of *Sting* babies would come into being, usually at the bases of older trees. A *Sting* baby was a newborn just like any other on StoryEarth, but they were only ever born on that one night each year. To this day, no one knows how, or why, or to whom.

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The next morning, Linn got up to wake Wrem. “Hey, sleepyhead.” She stroked his hair as he burrowed further down into the covers.

“Come on, sweetlight. MamaBette is putting out the offerings for the faeries. When she gets back we’ll be ready for breakfast. Come on. Up.”

She drew his limp little frame into her lap for a hug.

“Okay,” he mumbled.

She whispered into his hair, “I’ll make us some storytime tea, okay? And some Giggles. Would you like that?”

“Yeah,” he said, yawning, “but I getta go first.”

“All right. You can go first.”

But Bette didn’t come back for breakfast. Or lunch. As the morning stretched itself into late afternoon, Linn lost patience. *You made your point, Bette*. *Come on home now.*

Evening fell. Linn took Wrem next door, where he ran into the house like it was his own.

“Scamp!” Celeste play-flicked her kitchen towel at Wrem as he sped by, then turned to Linn.

“What’s up?”

“Bette left this morning. We fought and she’s still not back. And I, I—”

Celeste hugged her. “Go. I’ve got him.”

Linn trotted down the lane, throwing Bette’s name into the air. She’d stop every now and then to listen hard. In her panic, she’d forgotten the simplest idea. She found a soft place in the earth and took her stance, stood still, and tried to calm herself, remembering when Bette had taught her how to do this in their first weeks together. She aligned her spinal energies with her clear message to everyone: *I’m looking for Bette. She’s been gone all day. Please send her home if you see her.* The message went down her spine, through her feet, and into the earth—where anyone connected to her would receive it into their own knowing.

She had almost reached Blimmer’s house. If Bette had gone anywhere to vent, it would be to her best friend. But just before she touched Blimmer’s garden gate, something flickered in the corner of her eye. It was too far away to tell for sure—a person? A spirit? It glowed with a greeting light, so she knew it was safe. She walked toward it, then stopped abruptly. Closed her eyes and opened them again to be sure. She felt faint.

It was Bette. Smiling and crying. She held a tiny newborn *Sting* baby, lit from within. The two women swam in each other’s eyes for a moment.

“How?” Linn whispered as she approached what was almost holy ground.

“I left angry this morning. I walked and walked. And then I started feeling off, something like a whole mess of bees stinging me from the inside out. They say that’s the Pull. Further I got into the forest, the better I felt, just like they say. And then I seen her. So beautiful. Just waitin’ for me with those big eyes, and look at her light, look how happy she is and the faeriecloth, feel this, feel it—how soft.” She was completely besotted.

“Bette! Our baby. You!” They both laughed. “Of all people in the world, *you* were pulled into the Gathering—and now we have our very own *Sting* baby*.”*

CHAPTER 2: THE TROUBLE WITH MILLIE
*Thirteen Years Later*

 Millie trudged into the kitchen, still in her jammies and yesterday’s brown braids, sulking and half asleep. On her way to the dinner table, she dutifully dipped her fingers in the bowl and sprinkled the gratitude blessing over the altar for the faeries.

“Good morning, hon. Go sit. I made Giggles for breakfast.”

Millie rolled her eyes. “I’m not a little kid, you know,” she said, slumping into a chair.

A plate of cupcakes frosted with the leaves from their laughter bush sat on the table. The dark green leaves trembled a little in anticipation. Millie started to take one and it hopped away, just out of reach. She sat still for a long moment, then, with predatory speed and precision, she nabbed the little green Giggle. Her grip activated its properties, and peals of laughter cascaded out of the cupcake. Millie was in no mood for this. She ate the thing without cracking a smile.

She watched her MamaLinn work a pile of dough, folding soft edges into the center over and over, sprinkling in the Whisperflour, folding some more. It was the Secrets Cake for some special event at the StoryEarth Preservation Precinct.

Millie’s grumpy mother, MamaBette, was taller and stocky with fair skin, sharp, blue eyes, and hair as short as you could have it and still have hair. She sat at her desk nearby, fretting over the schedule.

“Can we do five hundred Hooray!Cakes for next Thursday? Precinct wants to honor Myrtle Somebody, the outgoing Old Woman in the Shoe.”

Linn went over to her calendar. “No. We’ve got the Bluebeard party, and a Precinct event. Milliebug, I can warm you up some cackle tea if you want. Would you like that?”

Millie had her head down on her outstretched arm, teasing the last Giggle. “Do they have cackle tea in the Precinct?”

“Yes, hon. They have all the same stuff to eat. But it tastes better here, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, aiming her comment like an arrow. “I haven’t been to the Precinct since Grandma Set’s funeral. When I was four.”

Wrem clumped toward the kitchen in his forest boots.

“Hallo, Mamas. Hi, bug.”

He put his coat on.

“G’Morning, love.” Linn wafted a plate of fresh, hot rolls under Wrem's nose and onto the table. “Buttered poems. And there’s tea here. Help yourself.”

“Sorry, Mama, no time. I’ll take the poems with me, though, thanks. I’ve got Tree Care kids coming for class this morning. I’m late.”

And with a nod to MamaBette and his bag of poems, he tried to pull one of Millie’s braids, but she batted him away…and then sulked into the silence that followed his departure.

“Mama?”

“Hm?”

“Why can’t I ever go with you on a delivery?”

“We’ve been over this, hon. You’re too old to go through as a baby—I carried you in my energy field then but I can’t anymore—and you’re too young to go through as yourself. You need training. You’re not ready.”

“But—”

“Finish your breakfast and go see Drauml. I’m sure you two can keep yourselves busy today.”

“Why can’t you just train me now? You trained Wrem, and he gets to go with you all the time.”

MamaLinn wiped the counter as she answered, reining in her exasperation.

“Wrem was two years older than you when I trained him.”

“It’s because he was a Ceremonial baby, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Millie, All Things Told, not this again.”

“It is. He always gets treated special.”