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Keepers of the Flame

Chapter 1

Denver, Last of May, Early afternoon

He wasn't worth it. Elizabeth Drystan stomped down the grocery store aisle, pushing her metal basket hard. The damn thing had a wonky wheel, of course, and Elizabeth reveled in the necessity of using force.

The man wasn't worth her heartbreak. Heartbreak? More like her heart had been ripped out, leaving a horrible, bloody, aching core. As a newly-board-certified doctor starting a job in Denver Major Hospital next month, she knew her physical heart still beat. But, oh, her emotional one was shredded into pieces.

The jerk, Cassidy, had said she was "crowding" him. He "needed space." Just when she thought she could plan the rest of her life – starting with a wedding. After a year, Cassidy had broken their engagement. Because he needed space.

Elizabeth had told him to go to Wyoming.

And the inexplicable auditory illusions – chanting, gong and chimes – were taking her up to the edge of temper and sanity. Even now she had to block the sounds from her mind.

She took a corner fast and crashed into another cart. The jolt sang up her arms. She opened her mouth to spew – and saw her twin sister, Bri, who was supposed to be in Sweden – purple streaked hair and all. Elizabeth burst into tears.

Bri reached for her, hugging and soothing. "I knew something was wrong. I had to come back."

Elizabeth didn't care where her free-spirited sister had been, only that she was holding her. Her tears were dripping down Bri's fallen earbuds and she wondered if salt water damaged them. The

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silliness of that thought made her gasp, choke, and stifle the water flow. Digging into her cart for one of the already opened boxes of tissues, Elizabeth wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "God, am I glad you came."

Bri patted her on the shoulder. "I knew you were sad." Her jaw tightened. "Man problems, right? That Doctor Medical-Prodigy-Slick-Hunk-Son-Of-A-Bitch. I told you he was an arrogant snob of a bastard. Finally showed his true colors."

Elizabeth hugged her. "I'm glad you're here."

"Actually, I'm back for good."

That was startling and Elizabeth welcomed the distraction, even if she didn't believe it. "Really?" She stepped back to scan Bri's face under her spiky hair of brown and purple. There was an unaccustomed seriousness in her hazel gaze along with . . . uncertainty?

Shrugging, Bri flushed. "No place like home, right?"

"So they say." But lately Elizabeth had begun to feel a change of venue might be good. She could reconsider her decision about starting at Denver Major Hospital. Take a long break, call around to some of her other offers. Her feet were actually tingling. She wondered if that was what Bri called "itchy feet." Leaving home and Cassidy Jones had appealed.

"Elizabeth?" Bri was smiling. "You went away on me."

That was usually Elizabeth's phrase to her twin.

After one last blow into her tissue, Elizabeth tucked it away in a plastic baggie in her purse, took out an antiseptic towelette packet, opened it and wiped her hands.

Looking amused, Bri rolled up her earbuds and slipped her player in her purse. "Feel better?"

"Always, when you're here."

Bri looked away, then back, hunched a shoulder. "You know why I've been gone. I had to see if other places were more accepting of...our talent."

Elizabeth never wanted to talk about that subject. "The folks will be glad to see you. They were hoping you'd come home for Dad's birthday."

"This time the favors I called in were solid. Got here this morning. Everywhere's been interesting. Denver and home is better."

Touching the puffiness under her eyes, Elizabeth winced. "My God, look at me, breaking down in a grocery store!"

Bri glanced around, "You wouldn't be the first, and you picked an appropriate place. Supplies all around. Tiger balm's right behind your shoulder and aspirin on my side of the aisle." Bri grinned.

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Elizabeth always thought Bri had gotten the prettier smile. Bri said since they were identical, Elizabeth had it, too. That wasn't true. Bri's smile was special. Maybe because she was such a free spirit.

"Scuse me," said a tall, wiry black woman with salt and pepper hair, walking down the aisle. Her face showed irritation – that part which wasn't covered with a package of frozen baby peas. "I need one of those instant ice packs." Her visible eye rolled to other items on the shelves. "And one of those herbal sinus pillows, too."

Bri moved her cart. "Let's see," she said. "I'm a massage therapist," she tilted her head toward Elizabeth, "and she's a medical doctor. What happened?"

A corner of the woman's mouth quirked as she walked past Bri to Elizabeth, who was standing by the herbal pillows. "Volley ball." She took the peas from her face.

Elizabeth winced in sympathy, checked the woman's eye, then carefully felt around the bone. "No other head injury?"

"No."

"Blurry vision?"

"No."

"Looks like a big black eye."

The woman snorted. "Got that."

"Here," Bri said, ripping open the box and twisting the instant ice compress to initiate the cold. She placed the pack on the woman's face.

Then Bri did the unthinkable. Elizabeth saw an aura of green pulse from Bri's hand through the pack and bathe the woman's face for long, long seconds.

"I think you'll find it looks worse than it is," Bri said, releasing the compress after the woman dropped the peas in her basket and held the pack herself.

"Thanks, it feels better already."

"Here's your sinus pillow." Elizabeth hoped her voice was less stiff than she felt.

"Thanks again." The woman nodded and left.

"Are you crazy!" Elizabeth whispered. "I want to talk to you!" She jerked her cart around and headed toward an empty corner of the store.

Smiling, Bri sauntered after her, tugging her smoothly rolling cart. Elizabeth got her temper under control by the time her twin reached her.

"What were you doing!" Elizabeth demanded.

"You know what I was doing. Just because you deny our gift of healing hands, doesn't mean I

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do."

"You used it in a grocery store."

"What, you think healing should only be confined to clinics?" Bri glanced around. "Let me tell you, this store is pristine compared to some of the places I've been." She lowered her voice. "The refugee camps I've . . . worked . . . in."

Elizabeth clutched the handle of her grocery cart until her knuckles whitened. "Someone could have seen!"

"Seen what? It was only a little burst of energy." Bri's smile widened. "And well done, if I say so, myself. That bruise will fade in record time."

"Someone could have seen," Elizabeth repeated, unable to put enough distress in words.

Again Bri glanced around. "So, how many of our fellow shoppers can see healing auras, do you think? It's not even an organic store."

But Bri was frowning now, maybe she'd come to her senses. "You saw how the lady came straight to you, the doctor. People trust doctors with medical degrees, not those of us with healing hands. That's why I've decided that you got it right, by working within the western medical establishment."

Elizabeth still didn't know what to say, and must have appeared as confused as she felt.

Bri patted her shoulder, but her face went impassive. "I promise I won't let anyone know you have the gift, too."

Elizabeth winced and rubbed her temples. She could barely hear her sister for the cacophony once again inundating her mind. "Sorry to snap at you. These damned chimes are driving me mad!"

Eyes widening, Bri said, "Chimes? You too?" Her voice dropped. "What about a gong...and chants?"

Elizabeth knew her mouth opened and closed like a guppy's.

"You hear them too," Bri said.

"What?" Elizabeth whispered, clutching the handle of her cart again.

"Chanting voices more persistent than the chimes and gong. I thought something was wrong so got checked out in Sweden by both medical and alternative health practitioners. No observable or understandable physical or mental problems."

Swallowing, Elizabeth said, "I attributed it to emotional trauma."

"Well, you've had plenty of that. How long?"

"Three and a half weeks."

"Me too. Did you have your hearing checked?"

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Elizabeth sighed. "Yes. Let's give it another week, then decide what to do." Elizabeth turned to finish shopping, but Bri put a hand on her arm, snagged her gaze with the same changeable hazel eyes but showing a different pattern of specks. "It might be a sign that our healing powers are changing. I've noticed mine are a little more reliable and slightly stronger."

Elizabeth flinched.

Bri said, "Is that one of the reasons Cassidy broke up with you? Because he discovered you using your gift?"

"I don't use a gift. Sometimes something just seems to flow from me. Nothing important. But our last argument was because he'd noticed . . ." It hurt to remember. She waved a hand. "Past and done." She looked at their carts, then back at her sister, then they both stared at the sack of potatoes in each other's cart and shook their heads in unison. "I see you had a craving for potatoes, too," Elizabeth said.

"Yes," Bri said, "those really unhealthy shredded potatoes loaded with cheese and sour cream. Mickey potatoes." Mickey was the friend of their Mom's who'd given them the recipe.

Trying to lighten the moment Elizabeth closed her eyes and groaned theatrically in pleasure. "As medical professionals, we shouldn't consider more than a bite of those cholesterol bombs. A nice baked potato with a smidgeon of butter--"

Bri reached under a stack of greens and held up a couple of small plastic sacks. "Chocolate for my sweet craving." Bri shook the nuggets so little metallic wrappers rustled as the candies tumbled against each other, glittering. "Our favorites."

"You got dark chocolate for me." Elizabeth was touched. "You're so sweet. So bad, but so sweet." She glanced at her watch. "We have just enough time to settle you in, cook, dress, and go to the folks."

Bri nodded at Elizabeth's cell thrusting from her purse's outer pocket. "You should find about three messages from me on that."

"Oops." When she looked at the read out, it was blank. "Forgot to charge it." Another result of stress. She was tired of hurting because of Cassidy and forced the thought of him away again. Enough wallowing. Get on with life! Straightening her shoulders, she said. "I want you to stay with me."

Under lowered brows, Bri watched her, that uncertain look back in her eyes. "For real?"

"For real. You can have the guest room." She bit her lips to stop them from trembling, cleared her throat. "It'll be good to have you living with me, like when we were kids. Especially since I'm on vacation." She wanted her sister more now than ever since they'd become adults. Bri's her first

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walkabout had been during freshman summer vacation in college. Elizabeth had never admitted how much she wished Bri hadn't gone her own way. Perhaps she'd stay now.

"Okay," Bri said.

Elizabeth relaxed, smiled. Everything would be better now Bri was home.

* * *

A few hours later Bri and Elizabeth left their parents' home. "Mom and Dad loved our gift of an all-expenses-paid two weeks vacation in Hawaii." Bri was very pleased at how the dinner had gone – except for a tense few minutes when they skirted around Cassidy Jones, who'd usually celebrated with them.

Her parents had been delighted by Bri's announcement to settle in Denver and become a nurse.

She shifted the foam freezer chest full of ham, Mickey potatoes, crudities, baked beans and fruit salad that she carried.

Elizabeth hauled two sacks of potatoes. Apparently their mother had had the same craving as the twins. "Leaving tomorrow. All this food," their mother had grumbled, pressing it on her daughters.

Night had fallen and wispy clouds draped the black sky. Only a few stars could be seen from the city. Bri inhaled deeply. Their parents' house backed on Cheesman Park and the scent of thick grass and roses came on a cool breeze. Sweden's air had still carried the last of spring. For a moment she just stood and let the city sounds and scents and very atmosphere caress her.

There was no place like home. Finally her itchy feet had stopped tingling, bringing her back to her family.

"You're tired, let me drive," Bri said to her sister.

"You must be jet lagged."

"I was, but I got my second wind." As soon as she put her head on a pillow tonight she'd crash for sure, but right now she was in a state of hyper awareness. She unlocked the doors, opened hers and they stowed the chest and potatoes in the back seat and got in.

Elizabeth stared at her.

"What?" Bri asked as she turned the key in the ignition.

"You really are going to nursing school," Elizabeth said.

"That's right. I finally decided your way was the best." Bri pulled away from the curb. "I've learned a lot, but I'm tired of traveling. I can use my gift in the established medical community."

"I see," Elizabeth said, but the car was dark and Bri thought that Elizabeth had shut her eyes.

"You'll be a dynamite doctor with the benefit of our gifts. It's too late for me there, I don't want

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to take the time to go through med school, but nursing...yeah, I can do that."

More, heavier silence.

"All this time I've been sneered at because of my 'flaky' ideas and you've been the good twin because you followed Mom's path through medical school and didn't make waves."

"A little resentment there?" Elizabeth asked in a steady voice.

"Okay. Maybe. But I honestly think you need to admit to yourself that you have a special gift and you chose a career to use it...and you hide that you use it. I don't mind you hiding it—"

"Liar."

"Okay, some resentment there, too, but I've come to accept that you must hide it."

"My way is not your way."

"Oh, honey, I know that! But I want to hear the words from you. Just once. Come on, it isn't difficult. Just say, 'I have a special gift for healing.'"

"You don't want much," Elizabeth muttered. Her voice broke.

Bri pulled to the side of the road. Tapped her head on the steering wheel. "Stupid, stupid, stupid. I'm sorry, you have too much else to handle, and here I'm demanding more. Twin, you need this vacation."

"Tell me about it." Elizabeth was blowing her nose again. "I'm too damn sensitive to every word. Every glance. And being at Denver Major where Cassidy is . . ."

"And now your gift reminds you of him, too. Damn it!" Frustration welled through Bri. Her twin needed her comfort, but Bri, too, needed something from her sister – support, understanding. But here and now wasn't the time to demand it. She'd been impatient. Releasing her tight grip on the wheel, she opened herself to what she thought of as the healingstream, let the power soothe her, tingle into her hands and warm them. She set her palm on Elizabeth's shoulder, feeling her sister's energy field, more, her struggle against anger and depression. Bri sent the warm flow into Elizabeth.

After a moment, Elizabeth said, "Thank you."

"I have a special gift for healing."

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, you do." She leaned her head back on the seat rest, but said nothing about her own gift and that hurt Bri.

She rolled her shoulders. She wouldn't give up, she'd just let the tender subject go – for now. She rubbed her hands to absorb lingering energy, then touched the steering wheel to ground herself. She checked the street and pulled out into light traffic.

Elizabeth said, "Cassidy is incredible. He's a better physician than I am."

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"No." The word exploded from Bri. "Never. He's not. He may be more brilliant. He may have gone through the damn programs like a rocket, but he is not a better doctor than you. You're twice the physician he is. And you know why? Because you have heart."

Elizabeth blinked. "I hadn't thought of that. Heart. Huh."

"Huh yourself."

Bri drove down streets overhung with leafy branches.

Elizabeth's breathing evened. Bri felt her sister's glance, but said nothing. Elizabeth inhaled, let her breath out slowly. "Don't ask me to go in a direction I'm not ready for. I don't want the topic raised again."

Bri found her teeth set, and deliberately relaxed her jaw. Again. There was no place like home and family, and no one who could push her buttons so easily as Elizabeth. Bri turned the car east and a wave of sound washed over her, through her. "The sounds of chimes and stuff is getting louder."

Elizabeth said nothing, but she'd stiffened.

"Chanting mostly. Sheesh, don't even need to turn on the radio." She cocked her head. "Maybe I should have said 'merde.' Sounds like French."

There was a couple of minutes of uneasy silence, then Elizabeth finally said, "Never did like those French classes in school."

Then she did hear it too! Bri kept her tone light. "When you visited me in Cannes, you spoke French with a better accent than mine." A tinkle of chimes rippled, then settled inside her, coiling. She flexed her fingers. "Do you recognize that?"

"What?" The word sounded dragged out of Elizabeth.

"The chimes are the tones associated with the seven chakras: C, D, E, F, G, A, B."

"Leave it to you."

A gong sounded in her mind. Elizabeth flinched beside her. "Put on some speed. Let's get home."

"Right."

The rest of the drive passed in a rush, both physically and emotionally. Chanting blocked out all other sounds – except for the chakra chimes and the occasional gong. The rhythm was odd, Bri couldn't catch hold of any pattern, but it wound her so tight she was near panting.

Elizabeth gave a little moan, rubbed her temples. "I can't anticipate the beat." She squirmed. "It seems to be having a physical effect. My skin prickles."

"So does mine. Nerve endings do you think?"

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With a choppy exhalation of breath, Elizabeth said, "Probably. I have my medical bag up in the loft. We can check this out." She sounded as if she was reassuring herself as well as Bri.

"Of course," Bri said, pulling into the underground garage and parking in Elizabeth's space.

They got out. Bri grabbed the freezer chest and Elizabeth both bags of potatoes. As they hurried to the elevator, Bri realized her whole body trembled, the chanting was spiraling, rising with excitement, with demand. She glanced at Elizabeth and saw a huge flickering multi-colored banded aura. Bri's breath whooshed out. She noted her sister wouldn't look at her. "This is scary."