

All rights reserved; copyright © Robin D. Owens. The text contained within may not be reproduced in whole or in part or distributed in any form whatsoever OR SOLD without first obtaining permission from the author.

Note: This is an additional portion of Chapter 1 that was cut. It begins in the grocery store.

## Keepers Of The Flame

### Chapter 1

#### Denver, April, Early afternoon

Bri shook the nuggets so little metallic wrappers rustled as the nuggets tumbled against each other, glittering. "Our favorites."

"Mom's going to kill us."

"She doesn't have to know about the chocolate."

"She'll guess."

"Yes, but she'll also eat the Mickey potatoes, and Dad will dig into the treat."

"Oh, yes." Elizabeth glanced at her watch. "Dinner at the folks at 6:00. We have just enough time to get you settled in, make our dishes, dress, and go over to the folks."

"Add in a meditation break and it sounds like a plan."

Elizabeth made a moue. "No. Yoga instead."

"Oh, all right."

"Where did you stash your stuff?" Bri always travelled light.

"At Carroll's."

"Good old Carroll." Elizabeth hadn't spoken to their old neighbor for years. The drag queen had been getting odder and odder, and she didn't want any honest comment on her own oddity.

Bri nodded at Elizabeth's cell thrusting out of the outer pocket of her purse. "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 her stress. She was tired of hurting because of Cassidy and forced the thought of him away. Enough wallowing, time to get on with her 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. "In fact, if you don't mind, I can move in the rollaway bed into my bedroom and we can . . . talk like we did as kids." She'd like that. She wanted that. Wanted her sister more now than ever since they'd become adults and Bri had taken off on her first walkabout during freshman summer vacation in college.

"Okay," Bri said and they shared a glance that eased Elizabeth's pain. She'd concentrate on her sister's arrival and the changes it would make in her own life and hurt would fade.

Bri said, "Looks like my basket has more stuff, and the makings for dishes for Dad's

All rights reserved; copyright © Robin D. Owens. The text contained within may not be reproduced in whole or in part or distributed in any form whatsoever OR SOLD without first obtaining permission from the author.

birthday dinner, and I'll need to contribute to your pantry, so why don't you put your items back and I'll check out."

"You read my mind," Elizabeth agreed. She swiveled the basket around and took off at a stride. Everything was better now Bri was home.

Two hours later they lay side by side on the thick rug in Elizabeth's penthouse apartment in a highrise near the hospital. The windows were pristine and Bri watched fluffy clouds float across the blue sky. The yoga exercises had been challenging, she could still hear the chimes and gong and an odd chant.

The oven alarm dinged and broke the moment. Bri blinked as her stomach rumbled. She squeezed Elizabeth, let her go, patted her own abdomen. "Wow, those Mickey potatoes really smell good."

After another wipe of her nose, Elizabeth said. "Yeah, they do." A half-smile wobbled on her lips. "You were right, it's the perfect time for indulgence."

"Why don't you hit the shower first, and I'll take out the potatoes and finish up the melon balls for the fruit salad."

"You're doing too much . . ."

"I'm the freeloader here," Bri said, rolling to her feet, standing and stretching.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "I think in all your travels you paid your way one way or another."

"Of course." Usually with her healing talent. Bri walked behind the blue tiled breakfast bar that separated the kitchen from the living area, slid on hot-pad gloves colored in the shape of a dragon that she'd given Elizabeth, opened the oven, withdrew the pan and placed it on the burners. Her stomach gurgled again. "Haven't lost my touch, the cornflakes look toasty."

"Organic cornflakes on Mickey potatoes." Elizabeth walked away, shaking her head.

"A blending of old and new," Bri called after her.

\* \* \*

For Bri, dinner was excellent. Her mother had shed a few tears, her dad had hugged her hard and she knew her decision to stay was right. Time to settle down and home was the best place for that, she felt it all the way to her bones.

Her father's best friend and old college roommate had come to celebrate his birthday and had brought his new wife, whom Bri hadn't met. Talk was lively, her mother told light stories about the hospital where she was a surgeon, Dad did the same for the anthropology department which he headed, and her honorary uncle got in a few about the legal system. It was all like many, many past nights except they were all adults.

One topic, Elizabeth's ex-fiancé Cassidy Taban, was skirted around. Cassidy had been included in such family dinners for the last two years. Bri had liked him until the last time she'd seen him, his pride at being a medical prodigy having turned into solid arrogance. She'd sensed strain in her Elizabeth's and his relationship at the time, but had said nothing. She was sorry he'd become the man he was.

Her mother stared with concern at Elizabeth. "I know you've taken a week off before starting your position with Denver Major, but you have another three. Perhaps you should consider—"

"I'm fine, Mom."

All rights reserved; copyright © Robin D. Owens. The text contained within may not be reproduced in whole or in part or distributed in any form whatsoever OR SOLD without first obtaining permission from the author.

"I'll be glad to talk to the administrator for you."

"No, Mom."

"It isn't too late to change to another hospital. I'd very much like you to associate with Denver Teaching with me . . . ."

"No, Mom."

Bri realized Elizabeth had been fighting polite battles that she'd walked away from for years. Damn. She should have been here to support her twin. "I have news," she said.

"You always do, Eureka," Dad called her by his pet name. Her mother looked frustrated at the change of topic.

"But I won't tell until we're in the living room." Bri stood and began to clear the empty plates.

Trent said, "Wonderful food. Especially those potatoes."

An odd look crossed their mother's face and she looked distracted. "I've been craving potatoes."

Bri shared a eyebrow-raised glance with Elizabeth.

"These are the very best," Juliet said, standing to help with the clearing.

They'd all settled into the comfortable, bookcase lined living room, on the three old but sturdy leather sofas, when Uncle Trent turned to Bri. "I didn't mention it before, but Juliet is in the same sort of line you are, Bri. She owns the Queen of Cups new age store," he said with pride.

"I've been in there, but didn't know you were associated with Uncle Trent!" Bri said. "It's a wonderful place. Very atmospheric."

"Thank you, I do my best."

Bri glanced around, cleared her throat, nerved herself. She was sure her parents would like this, but it was a change for her. She'd always been anti-establishment and they'd been supportive but disapproving. They'd like this. "I've decided to go to nursing school."

Surprise showed on her parents and Elizabeth's faces.

"That's wonderful!" Elizabeth leaned over and hugged her.

"Have you chosen a school?" her mother asked.

"Yes, Denver School of Health Sciences. I know the pre-requisites, but I can test into the place. I've learned a few things kicking around in the alternative healing community." Her mom winced at that. She didn't believe in alternative healing. Bri pressed on. "And my grades were always good." They'd have been disappointed in her if her grades had been ordinary, and she hated the look of her parents disappointment.

Her father studied her. "You really mean to go through with this."

"Yes, I do."

He nodded. "Good."

That was that for him. Any doubts he had he'd keep to himself. A weight lifted from her and she smiled at him.

"If you plan on starting in the next class, you'd better hustle," her mom said.

Bri hesitated, lifted her chin. "I want to build up a nest egg, first." Her jaw clenched, but she forced herself to go on. "I'm an adult." That meant she didn't want their money to finance her, or her mom's influence to get her into the school. "I prefer to do this on my own."

All rights reserved; copyright © Robin D. Owens. The text contained within may not be reproduced in whole or in part or distributed in any form whatsoever OR SOLD without first obtaining permission from the author.

Her mom relaxed, even a corner of her mouth tipped upward. "You always do."

Whew! They were pleased, she could feel that radiating from them. Her dad put his arm around her mom's shoulders and squeezed. "We're glad you're staying in town."

"It's a bigger city than I'm used to, but I love it." Everyone heard her "I love you," too, she knew. "Besides, it's so much easier on the cell and pda and wireless laptop in the city than in the mountains."

Everyone laughed. "You and your toys," her mom said.

"Very nice," Juliet approved. "I think Trent told me that you are certified in therapeutic massage."

"Among other things," Trent muttered.

Juliet actually pinched him and he grinned. Yep, true love there, no question.

"I happen to know there's an opening in Denver Premier Clinic. I'll let Mary know you'll be calling to set up an interview." She smiled. "Fortuitous, isn't it?"

"That's a very prestigious clinic\*\*." Her mom stared at Juliet. Bri got the impression that her mother was seeing them both in a slightly different light.

Bri blew out a breath, grinned. "That will make my nest egg a very nice one."

Elizabeth reached out and grabbed her hand. "Bri's staying with me for a while."

Her father beamed. "This is the best birthday present I've had in years."

"Hmmm," her mother frowned. "I wonder if I should take that expensive gift back . . ."

Everyone laughed.

Bri caught Elizabeth's gaze and nodded. Pulling airline tickets from their purses, Bri handed one to her mother while Elizabeth gave a packet to her father. "Happy Birthday!" They chorused.

Their parents looked startled.

"You promised that if I took a week off now, you would too," Elizabeth reminded their mother.

"I cleared your calendar with the Anthro department," Bri said to their dad.

"But these tickets are for tomorrow morning!" Their mom protested.

"An all expense paid week in Hawaii. Hotel, meals, and gratuities included," Elizabeth said.

Their dad popped off the sofa and hugged them both. "My beautiful, wonderful daughters."

"Trent and Juliet helped," Elizabeth and Bri said in unison.

Their father turned to Trent. "Thank you." He smiled down at their mother, then back at Trent and Juliet. "Both of us thank both of you."

"Happy birthday, Clyde." Trent stood and clapped her father on his shoulder. "Live long and prosper."

Bri snickered.

Juliet stood too, wound her arm with her husband's. "We should be leaving."

Their mother's eyes widened. "All this food!"

"Freeze it," Bri said.

"I'm not keeping these potatoes in the house."

"Now, Nancy—" their father said.

All rights reserved; copyright © Robin D. Owens. The text contained within may not be reproduced in whole or in part or distributed in any form whatsoever OR SOLD without first obtaining permission from the author.

"The cornflake crust would go soggy. The girls can take them home," their mother stated. Their father sighed. "Oh, all right."

"And most of the ham, too. Trent, you and Juliet must take some of this food, too. Especially the ham."

"Fine with me." Trent rubbed his hands, winked at Juliet and followed their mother into the kitchen.

Juliet turned to them and held out her hands, obviously wanting Bri and Elizabeth to clasp them. Bri did, felt a tingle and her vision hazed, a clash of chimes sounded within her mind. She shook her head and saw Elizabeth staring at Juliet, mouth open.

"Juliet, honey, you coming?" called Trent.

"Yes, dear." The older woman released them. "Yes, we will all live long and prosper." She seemed to glide from the room.

"What was that?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know." Bri considered. "She's the owner of the Queen of Cups, she probably has some psi power, like we do."

"Oh, no." Elizabeth shook her head.

Their mother came to the threshold of the room, shaking her head. "Come along, twins. I'll load you down with food."