



Prologue to the HOLIDAY HEAT anthology

(Note this prologue was at the beginning of the Holiday Heat anthology when it first released. The stories of two sisters, Crista, told in *A WISH GRANTED* by Lynn LaFleur, and Jade, told in the story, *JADE*, by Jan Springer followed, and then *THE LAST CANDLE* was the final story in the anthology.)

Fragile glass figurines rested in a cushioned box—stars, Santas, trees, toys, even a miniature Noah’s Ark with a host of small animals to surround it. Shiny colored balls of red, green, blue and gold snuggled in individual containers, with lacy, white crocheted snowflakes floating among them. Three strings of Christmas lights had a few blinking bulbs interspersed among the steady ones. The angel tree-topper’s plaster body wore a blue satin robe below its light-brown floss hair and a glowing, golden halo. Most precious of all, though, was the one single, bubbling candle light, wrapped in layers of plastic wrap to protect it.

Three other boxes of decorations were scattered around Lindsey Hart’s living room, but those contained things she’d bought herself over the last few years. Some nice pieces nestled in them in, in truth—consolation prizes she awarded herself at the after-holiday sales for surviving another lonely Christmas while helping others find their dreams. None of them meant much to her compared to these.

These were Gram's last, most precious gift to her.

"There's magic in them, Lindsey," Gram had insisted, four years ago, as she lay dying. "And you have it in you to unlock the power. The candles especially. Wait for them to show you their message, then act. Act boldly, no matter how absurd it appears. Someone's life will be changed, and they'll thank you for it."

"I don't understand, Gram." Lindsey barely restrained a sob on the words.

A thin, hand lay gently over hers. "You don't need to understand now," Gram assured her. "Just remember when the time comes."

"There will always be magic in those ornaments, Gram. Because they were yours. I'll never...forget." Tears streamed hot and heavy down her cheeks.

Gram managed a smile that turned her thin, weary face radiant. "No. They have more magic than that. You'll see. Trust me." She sighed and had to wait a moment to gather her breath again. "There is magic, and in the end, you'll benefit as well, but it carries great responsibility. Take care of your sisters, Lindsey."

Only later would Lindsey understand that the last sentence wasn't a non sequitur.

She'd wanted to ask Gram to explain more, to tell her what kind of power the candles held, how she should use it, but the old lady was too tired. Unfortunately, she never got another chance. Gram died later that night, unexpectedly but peacefully, as she slept.

Lindsey had to tell her sisters, Crista and Jade, that Gram had passed away before either of them could get there to say goodbye. When they did arrive, the sisters huddled together for a long time over the next few days, holding onto each other as the tears flowed. Their parents had died some years before and Gram was all they'd had. With her death, they had only each other. And though they lived far apart, they kept in touch by phone and through annual get-togethers.

They met with Gram's attorney, a friend of Lindsey's from law school days, and learned that in addition to inheriting equal shares of Gram's modest estate, they'd each received specific bequests of some of her most treasured possessions. For Lindsey it had been the box of Christmas ornaments and Gram's prized crystal flower vases.

She didn't believe the ornaments could possibly have the magical power Gram had attributed to them, but she treasured them, nonetheless.

That first Christmas after Gram's passing, there were four candle lights ready to insert into the string of lights. Each lit up and bubbled merrily during the holiday season, reminding her of the way Gram's spirit had lit up her life.

On Christmas Eve, Lindsey got her first taste of the magic Gram had promised. A red-and-orange bubble light suddenly flared brightly, almost like a small explosion, except no noise accompanied it and the glow held steady for a long time. Drawn by the sudden brightening, Lindsey moved over to the tree to stare at it.

In the golden yellow halo around the flaring bubble light, she saw...movement. Small figures. A tall, thin, woman of late middle age, with dyed flame-red hair and...a dog? The red-haired woman had to be Joanna, a neighbor of Gram's for the last twenty years. She'd been a close friend of Gram's for most of those, too, even though Joanna had been almost twenty years younger. Both women had been widows for a long time, with a shared interest in scouring flea markets. They usually returned with dubious collections of odds and ends.

But Joanna didn't have a dog. In fact Lindsey couldn't imagine fastidious, neat-freak Joanna with a pet of any kind, a creature that would shed on her furniture and track mud on the carpets.

In the vision, though, Joanna clutched the leash of a brown, black and tan creature that looked like a cross between a basset and a beagle. She laughed as the dog trotted along the park walkway, nosing at leaves, and suddenly strained to chase after a chipmunk.

The vision faded, went misty and reformed. She saw the dog again, but not in the park this time. In fact, it was in a box of some kind, a concrete box with bars... a cell at the pound. Instead of capering in the fresh air, the animal curled in a ball, eyes half-open in a droopy stare, only rising to attention and yipping each time someone came near, then settling down with a sad little whine and shake of the tail when the person left again.

Then it was gone. Dog, Joanna and the golden flare all disappeared. The bubble light blinked a few times and went out. Lindsey tried to reseal it in the socket, and tapped it a couple of times, but it appeared the bulb had blown. She mourned it, since it had been one of the flea market treasures that Gram had somehow imbued with her own magic.

Wait for them to show you their message, Gram had said, and then act boldly on what you see.

What was she supposed to do—? Oh, no, please!

That wasn't acting boldly, it was acting foolishly. And arrogantly. What gave her the right to decide Joanna needed a dog in her life? And not just any dog—a pound puppy mutt with big, sad eyes.

No way. She wasn't going to present Joanna with an unknown and unwanted dog, just because her own imagination had cooked up a weird vision showing them happy together. Not in this lifetime.

Act boldly... Someone's life will be changed.

Well, yes, but Gram hadn't promised their life would be changed for the *better*. A dog was a big commitment, and possibly a burden, for a woman living alone.

Act boldly.

Hell.

Lindsey got her coat and headed out for the pound, leaving quickly before she had time to think too much about it and convince herself it was an entirely foolish notion. She immediately retraced her steps when she got out her door and realized she had no idea where the pound was. She looked it up in the phone book. If the dog was there, she might start believing there was some kind of truth in the vision.

The dog was there. It sat up and stared at her when she approached its cage, tail pounding the ground in hopeful rhythm.

Lindsey had nothing against dogs—as long as they didn't jump on her, shred her pantyhose, goober her face or leave muddy paw prints on her clothes.

This one was smarter than he looked. When the attendant opened the door to the cage, he marched out, sniffed at her feet and wagged his tail, but he didn't attempt to jump up or kiss her. Lindsey paid fifty dollars for shots and worming medication, then loaded the dog into the back of her car.

An hour at the pet store and an additional ninety bucks later, Lindsey drove to Joanna's home. She parked at the curb and sat there for the next ten minutes trying to work up her nerve to take the dog in. She glanced back in time to see him slobber on the

bright red bow she'd bought him, along with a food dish, retractable leash, crate, and fifty pounds of premium dog food.

Joanna would probably give her an earful and tell her to take the mutt right back to the pound.

Lindsey stared at the front door of Joanna's home until something cool and damp licked across the back of her neck. "All right, all right, you're eager to get to your new home," she said to the dog, reaching back to push him away. "Let's go."

Joanna answered the door after the second knock and greeted Lindsey with her usual warmth. It quickly changed to puzzlement when she noticed her companion.

"You've got a dog?" Joanna went down on one knee to pet the mutt and let him kiss her hands. "He's adorable. When did you get him?"

"Um...actually, I don't have a dog. He's yours. Merry Christmas."

Joanna's head jerked upward and her eyes widened. "Lindsey!" Joanna's expression changed and sudden tears glittered. "How did you know? It's been so lonely since your Gram died, and I've been thinking about getting a dog, but I hadn't told anyone yet."

Lindsey felt as though she'd been punched in the gut. "I suppose...in a way...this is a gift from Gram."

"Oh?"

In the face of Joanna's skepticism, Lindsey didn't want to explain, but she owed it to both Joanna and Gram. When she finished the story, Joanna looked flummoxed but not nearly as disbelieving as Lindsey expected.

"It would be like Nora to find a way to watch over us even after she's gone from this world," Joanna finally said.

Lindsey helped Joanna set up the food dish and crate, then departed, leaving dog and mistress cuddling up together on the sofa.

Three weeks later, Joanna met a man while walking the dog, now named Noah, in the park. Sam was walking his retriever, and the leashes somehow got tangled as the two dogs nosed each other.

Six months later Joanna and Sam married. Both dogs went with them on the honeymoon.

The next Christmas, Lindsey set up the tree the day after Thanksgiving. She waited, not too patiently, for another candle flare, wondering what this one would bring.