

## Jude and Sloan Holiday Short 2017

Sloan held Grady to her chest and peered out the window as Jude's truck disappeared down the snowy road. He'd only be gone for about twelve hours on this mystery trip of his, but she already missed him.

Fortunately, she had more than enough to occupy herself.

Her baby chose that moment to squawk in that adorable way of his. "First thing's first, huh, Grady?" She made sure her phone was close and sat down in the chair by the fire to feed him.

*I can't believe this is my life.*

The little house in Maine was even more cozy than the one she'd loved so much in Oregon. From the stone fireplace to the comfortable furniture she and Jude had picked out together, to the miles and miles of trees around them that somehow made her feel safe despite the relative isolation. She had every intention of getting a job once Grady was ready for preschool, but Sloan still ventured into town on a regular basis. She had a feeling she and Jude would always be the new folk in town, even if they lived there fifty years, but she didn't mind too much.

She smoothed a finger over Grady's soft cheek. "I love you, little guy."

The door flew open, making her jump and Grady squeal, but she laughed as her older sister strode into the room as she owned the place. Sloan shook her head. "Did you practice that entrance enough to get good at it?"

"Some things are just natural." Carrigan grinned. She looked around. "I like the place. Better than the last time I got an SOS from you." She shut the door and walked over to scrunch her nose at Grady. "Tiny little thing, isn't he?"

"Babies generally are."

She laughed. "You've gotten saucy. I like it. God, I've missed you."

"I'm missed you, too." Grady finished up feeding, and she repositioned, tucking her shirt back into place and propping him against her shoulder to burp. "You look good, Carrigan." She wore black leggings and a cabled sweater that hugged her body. Tall black boots and windblown dark hair completed the look.

"Always." She considered Sloan. "James is camped out in the truck. Can I give him the go-ahead to get this party started. I'd hate to still be here when that big burly man of yours comes rushing home to save you from your evil family."

Sloan arched a brow. "Dramatic much?"

"Only most days." Carrigan walked back to the door and cracked it, waving a hand outside. "God, it's even colder here than it is in Boston. How do you live like this?"

"I have a big burly man to keep me warm." Grady let out a belch to shake the rafters, and she stood. "Let's get started."

It went quickly. Too quickly, really. She would have liked a few hours to sit and share a few cups of tea and catch up with her sister, but today time was of the essence. She didn't put it past Jude to come home early, and she wanted things in place before he did.

Several hours later, Carrigan had Grady in her arms and James was packing the boxes into his truck to haul off with them. Her sister smiled down at Grady. "He's going to be trouble. You know that, right?"

"Only the best kind of trouble." She hesitated, but the need for secrecy wasn't quite as intense as it had been a year ago. "Carrigan, I'd like you and James to come back up here sometime. To visit, not to conduct top secret favors."

Her sister smiled at her, the expression lighting up the room. "We'd like that a lot." She turned as her husband walked into the room and pointed a finger at the baby. "This one is way less trouble than Moira was at his age. What do you think? Should we start popping out a few of our own?"

He froze, his blue gaze flying from Carrigan to Sloan and back again. "Time to leave."

"Oh, don't be like that. I was joking. Mostly." She pressed a soft kiss to Grady's head and

passed him back to Sloan. "Let me know now it goes."

"I will. Travel safe." She hugged her sister, having to let go far too soon. Then James and Carrigan were gone, disappearing out the front door and driving into the trees.

Sloan helped herself to some of the chicken noodle soup they'd brought with them, and then it was time to feed Grady yet again. She'd just finished and was resting contentedly when she heard the unmistakable sound of Jude's truck. *He's home*. As tempting as it was to get up and meet Jude at the door, she wanted to see his face when he walked in.

He didn't make her wait long.

He made it two steps inside the door before he froze, his dark eyes going wide. "What..." He turned to the giant tree situated in the corner of the room, decorated in red and gold. Presents spilled out from beneath it, all in coordinating red and gold prints. It looked like something out of a catalogue, but that was Christmas. Finally, Jude turned back to her, his shock melting away. "You've been busy."

"I had a little help."

He shut and locked the door and took the time to remove his boots before he crossed to her. Jude braced his hands on the arms of her chair and leaned down to kiss Grady's head and then to deliver a significantly more thorough kiss to her lips. When he finally lifted his head, the room spun a little. Jude straightened, carefully tucking Grady against his chest as he did. "Looks like a Christmas explosion in our living room."

Nothing there to tell her what he thought of it.

"I know we said we wouldn't do much of anything, but last year hardly counts as our first Christmas considering we were still figuring things out. This year *is*." She stood, wishing she'd thought to change her shirt into something less rumpled. "I know you've never really had much of a Christmas—not a real one—and I wanted to make this special." She motioned to the tree. "Christmas was always one of the few times of years where my family put aside the scheming and politics and were just...a family. A messy family, to be sure, but a family first and everything else second. I wanted to share that with you."

He walked over to crouch next to the tree and used his free hand to open the little tag attached to the nearest wrapped present. "Carrigan?"

"I was hardly going to haul Grady out and chop down a tree myself." She gave a half smile. "Carrigan's been petitioning to come visit for months. This just gave her the excuse she needed."

Jude straightened and faced her, his expression unreadable. "There are gifts from the rest of your siblings."

"Yes, well..." Sloan gave a helpless shrug. "It's Christmas. It's as close to magic as we get in the real world."

Jude walked to her, his big body framed with the pretty lights of the Christmas tree. He slid his hand along her cheek and through her hair. "Sunshine, the only thing magic in this room is *you*." He glanced over his shoulder. "Think I can convince you to open a few tonight."

She laughed, her heart feeling too full in her chest. "That's cheating. You have to get up early Christmas morning like the rest of the world." She pressed up onto her tip toes and kissed him. "But if you want to go put Grady to bed, I have a present you can unwrap early in the bedroom."

His lips curved against her mouth. "In that case, I think it's about bedtime."

Sloan barely waited for him to disappear down the hall toward their son's room to jump to her feet and rush into the master bedroom. She took the fastest shower of her life, and dressed in the festive lingerie she'd purchased a couple weeks ago. Knowing Jude as she did, she hadn't gone too extravagant—chances were, it would end up on their floor in tatters.

She walked out of the bathroom the same moment he closed the bedroom door behind him. Sloan stopped, shyness threatening to overtake her. "Hey."

His gaze coasted over her body in a stroke she could almost feel. Motherhood had changed her body, but if anything, Jude only loved her the more for it. He stalked toward her. "Thinking I can get behind this Christmas thing."

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh, yeah." He bracketed her hips with his big hands. "But before we get carried away, I have something for you." Jude pulled a ring box out of his pocket and pressed it into her palm. "Things happened pretty fucking quickly that first time."

She opened it to find a ring nestled inside. The sweeping silver setting made her think of the ocean, and the carefully situated diamonds and sapphires only reinforced it. "Jude, it's beautiful."

“Not as beautiful as you.” He took it from the box and replaced the simple band she’d been wearing for the last year. Naturally, it fit perfectly. “I love you, sunshine.”

Her heart took up residence in her throat. “I love you, too.”

He pressed a surprisingly sweet kiss to her lips and then stepped back with a wicked grin. “Now, get your ass on that bed. I like the picture you make in red, but if you don’t want me to rip those fucking panties off, you’d better get out of them in the next five seconds.”

“Five seconds? You’re getting slow.” She let loose a giggle when he made a grab for her. Jude scooped her up and dumped her on the bed, and then he was on her, pinning her to the mattress.

She loved every second of it.

Sloan dug her fingers into his hair and kissed his neck. “Merry Christmas, Jude.”  
“Merry Christmas, sunshine.”