

Don't

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Don't

"Don't." The word came out as a gasp. My fingers were curled in his hair, my hips writhing beneath him. Still, he needed to stop, but I knew he wouldn't. It was how we ended up here. That single word.

He'd said it when I picked up the small shellfish, ready to deposit it onto my plate. A warm hand grasped my wrist. No stranger would touch me so casually, as if he knew me. Indignant, I pulled away before facing its owner. When I looked into eyes black as pitch, the vehemence in me subsided.

"They've turned," he said. The sexy curve of his lips drew me in.

He leaned past me, the rich scent of his cologne wafting over me like a gentle mist. With the expertise of someone who did this for a living, he deposited two items I had passed over onto my plate. "Try these instead."

When he turned away, it was my turn. I didn't want him to leave my presence. He called to my nature. I brushed my hand over his shoulder. A familiar hunger in me pulsed for him, so I said, "Don't."

Neither of us needed much persuasion. Without even bothering to exchange names, he took me by the hand. I followed him through the restaurant, into the kitchen past workers too surprised or too busy to care. Then we were outside, surrounded by used bricks holding up buildings that had seen much.

He pushed me against the wall, his mouth, damp and hot, slanted over mine. Blind, I wrestled his belt, then pants, pushing at them, forcing them out of my way. This was my need. His hardness, slick at the end and waiting for me. Rough, fast we coupled against that wall. He shuddered against me, his essence spilling into me with brutality that made me my vision hazy. He dropped to his knees, pressed his mouth over my body and a starburst lit the sky as the orgasm rocketed through me.

Satisfied, now that I had what I needed, I expected him to pull away. I glanced down, too late seeing the flash of his teeth. Too late recognizing his intention. My body still pulsing, I tried to tell him, tried to warn him, but he ignored the word.

“Don’t,” I said.

He sank into my thigh, pulling my blood into him. He drank long and hard. The sensuality of it as intoxicating as the sex we just shared. Then, as I knew it would, my tainted blood hit his system. He fell against the ground, agony twisting his body. Within moments it was over. He was no more. Dispassionately, I watched the dust scatter to the wind. Pulled my clothing into place.

I rubbed my hand over my stomach. Already I could feel the result of our union starting to push at my belly. It wouldn’t be long before I would need privacy. My third child would be here within hours.

I still find it odd that I can detect a vampire at first sight and yet, every single time, they fail to recognize me.

The End

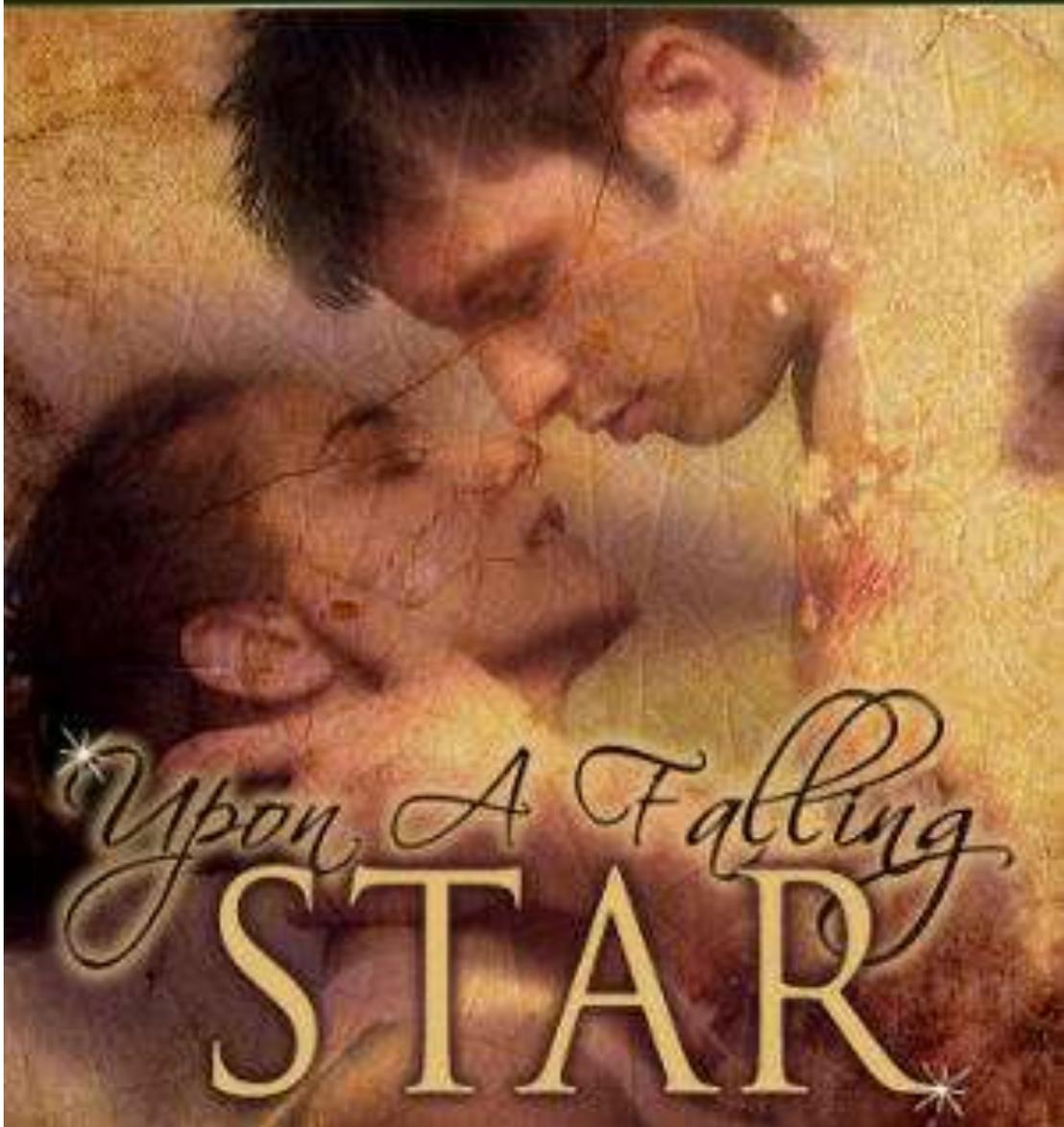
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COBBLESTONE PRESS PRESENTS



12 DAYS OF
CHRISTMAS

Dee Carney



Releasing December 20, 2008

Chapter One

Hope hit the delete key on the answering machine as hard as she dared without permanently damaging the stupid thing. Donna, her supposed best friend, had known that Miles would be coming over. She *knew* he was coming by today and still she cancelled. It had been *her* infuriating idea that the two exes bury the hatchet, get over it, extend the olive branch and all that trite crap.

She gritted her teeth and went back into the kitchen to check on the food. In there, the scent of corn pudding, frenched green beans and roasted chicken overpowered the aroma of burning wood in the fireplace. In appreciation, her stomach rumbled enthusiastically. Before she could reflect on her hunger however, a sense of disappointment in her friend flashed through her again.

Really, though.

Wasn't Hope being the bigger person by even asking Miles by for a pre-holiday meal? Hell, that was the way she figured it. She hadn't been the one to break up their relationship of one and a half years.

She pulled the bottle of wine out of the fridge and uncorked it. Stemware already adorned the table. A quick glance into the dining room confirmed their readiness, and she surveyed the kitchen once more. Showing a presentable home was the least Hope could do. The fact that Miles would also be bringing Maia, a model—of course—and his current girlfriend, motivated her to make certain that everything sparkled.

Though, was she being honest with herself about who this was for? She brought an errant hand to her mouth and chewed on the thumbnail absently. Wincing at the unwanted memories, she reflected again on their breakup.

Even though she spent the last year trying to figure out where the couple had gone wrong, she was still at a loss. She hadn't been *that* bad looking, right? Sure, her too-common brown hair tended to need styling. What business woman these days didn't treasure the convenience of a ponytail? And sure, her matching brown eyes were just as common, but who the hell had time to always keep up with the makeup required to accentuate them? Contacts were out, for a number of reasons. And sure, she wasn't as skinny as she had been back in college when she met Miles, but who was?

True, she wasn't that bad looking. But in retrospect, during the time they had been together, she kept herself as appealing as a woman who fell out of an ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down.

Dammit.

Hope exhaled with a loud sigh of disgust. When Miles announced one evening that he was leaving, it had come out of left field, lack of attention to her physical appearance or not. He'd said it with the same tone in his voice that he used to announce he was going to move the car. There was no emotion there. No anger. No resignation. Nothing that hinted at why he wanted to break up.

For her part, Hope had accepted it with the same emotionless resignation. For a split moment, she thought to fight for what they had together, but the urge faded as quickly as it had come. That was until she saw him out on a date with someone else.

Seeing the couple walking hand in hand set off something like a bomb inside of her.

She charged almost half a week's salary on her credit card for the sole purpose of changing her hairstyle, including color. She then stopped at a boutique and bought clothing in colors she would have shied away from before. An entire weekend reviewing books and the internet for instruction on proper makeup application followed.

Yep. Miles Cavanaugh would be sorry. Tonight was going to be the first time he saw the *new* Hope.

Donna's idea of inviting him over seemed like such a good one! It would be Hope's opportunity to show him what he was missing out on. Then maybe, just maybe, he'd announce what a terrible mistake he had made by leaving and now wanted to return to Hope forever.

And she'd have won.

Only now, Donna cancelled because she was sick. Good Lord. Couldn't she have sucked it up for one night? What was a little vomit and diarrhea between friends?

Sighing again, Hope retrieved the wine bottle and swept a glass off of the table. A sense of guilt over consuming it before her guests could arrive tried to wrestle itself into existence. She poured herself half a glass anyway. She sipped it, and the sultry liquid warmed her in ways the fire roaring in the fireplace couldn't.

Stifled by the sudden internal blaze, she went to the front door and threw it open before stepping onto the patio. The caress of a cool breeze made her shiver, but she remained otherwise motionless there. The night air was soothing and serene.

She closed her eyes and let out another deep sigh. Then, after a brief shake of her perfectly coifed honey-blond hair, she reviewed her motivation for bringing Miles here. Sorted through the real reason she wanted him to see her now.

When she opened her eyes again, she beheld the twinkling of a million stars above the skyline. It was at that moment, tears sprang to her eyes.

Who did she think she was kidding?

This was pathetic. No one should want their ex-boyfriend—who, if rumor was to be believed, dated haphazardly now—back. She should have been glad that they ended things early enough, as her mother liked to quip, while she was still young and desirable. Otherwise, they could have stayed together and might have eventually delved into a passionless marriage

Then why was she trying so hard to please him?

Perhaps it wasn't too late to call him to cancel before he arrived. If Donna lived through her bout with the flu, she was going to kill her. This was such a *bad* idea. Yep. She'd go inside now to call and cancel.

She ran her hand along the redwood banister and then let out a breath of air. The immediate condensation of her warm breath against the cool night brought back the

smile. Perhaps instead of focusing on how to get her ex-boyfriend back, she should be enjoying the Christmas season.

As she turned to go inside, a moving flash of light out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned back around. Off in the distance, almost at the level of the horizon, a brilliant flash of light arced over the skyline. A falling star.

What did they say about making a wish on one? She shrugged her shoulders in a brief gesture, and her lips twitched. It couldn't hurt.

Hope thought for a moment and closed her eyes. Eyebrows furrowed, she concentrated on the correct words to use that would help ease her loneliness. She didn't want to be too vague, but it wouldn't help to be too demanding either.

Please, send my true love to me.

Opening her eyes, she looked around. When nothing happened, she chuckled to herself. What had she been expecting?

The crisp air was still just cool enough to warrant a sweater. The forest surrounding the cabin was quiet, with the occasional cracking of broken branches audible from the distance. She could even smell the pungent aroma of burning wood in the night air. All of these things were there before the wish. Nothing new happened.

She chuckled again at her impatience. Just as she started to head inside, she stopped at an unexpected noise in the front yard. She glanced sharply toward the driveway. Hope first heard and then saw an approaching silver luxury vehicle.

Miles.

Her heart hammered. The heat of a blush crept over her cheeks. Her legs were weak, and she had to grip the door to remain standing upright. The traitorous limbs felt like gelatin and refused her commands to walk.

Oh God. Wish upon on a star and *he* immediately shows up. A man who would be late to his own funeral showed up thirty minutes early? What did this mean?

"Are you alright?"

She turned towards the person who spoke. In the darkness, a stranger stood at the edge of her property. His head was covered by a thick hoodie, but the way he filled it out gave her a pretty good sense of his masculine form. She swallowed hard and stared at him. Intellectually, she knew she should have been terrified, but his uncanny timing gave her reason enough to pause.

This was so typical. Make a wish for true love—for one man—and two men show up. *What exactly did this mean?*

Her legs chose that moment to buckle, and she crumpled down in an ungraceful heap. The loud thuds of quick, powerful steps boomed from the wooden patio. The next thing she knew, she was looking into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Something in the back of her mind niggled at her as she stared into them. There was something familiar there.

"I don't think you are," he murmured. Before she could protest, strong arms wrapped themselves around her body. She inhaled the nutmeg-like scent of his cologne. Absorbed by how incredible he felt—and smelled—without thinking, she reached

around him for support. The man lifted her with ease, and she leaned her face into his neck.

God, he really smelled good.

Her skin tingled with anticipation where he gripped around her shoulder and beneath her knees. And—oh, hell—he didn't just feel good. He felt *damned good*.

As he carried her across the threshold of her doorway, a car door slammed, and the familiar voice of Miles drifted towards them. The ten pound weight loss she had forced herself through made this moment something she would forever cherish. The man carried her as if she weighed nothing.

Try though she might to speak, her mouth refused to protest the way he gripped her tightly to his chest. Her submissive cling might betray her wantonness, but at the moment, she couldn't care less. A woman didn't get carried away like this every day. And of course, he smelled so erotically good.

He stepped inside, twisting his torso to survey the living room in which he now stood. With fresh eyes Hope surveyed it too. From this position, the entire contents of the living and dining rooms were visible. The flimsy Christmas tree her parents passed on to her at her insistence stood proudly in one corner. Gentle hissing and popping of wood burning drew attention to the fireplace against the far wall. An eclectic mix of worn and contemporary furniture completed the décor. The scent of baked chicken hinted at the close proximity of the kitchen. If he took a few steps further in, he would be able to see the stairwell leading to the equally small living quarters upstairs.

Pride swelled through her chest. Be it ever so humble, there *was* no place like home.

"What the hell? Are you alright, Hope?"

Miles's words cut through her thoughts. The man carrying her seemed unstartled and turned to face her ex.

"She fainted," he replied. Hope looked up, noting the way his jaw moved as he spoke.

"Not fainted. I just stumbled," she said.

With trembling fingers, she splayed her hands against him. All thoughts of pushing away from him fled when she touched the hard expanse of his chest. The arm beneath her knees dropped away though, and Hope slid down his body, her feet coming to rest against the plush, carpeted floor. Her face flushed as she replayed the memory of their bodies sliding against each other. There was a whole lot of man there.

He looked down at her, one eyebrow arched. "Stumbled?"

"Fainted. Stumbled. In any event, thank you for your assistance...." Miles appeared agitated; his words clipped. He extended his arm towards the open doorway, but his attention focused on Hope's hair.

As if on cue, Maia, fashion model and the latest attraction in the Miles Cavanaugh Theme Park, stepped through it.

Hope willed her fingers to stay where they were. The long platinum tresses of his current girlfriend made her want to tuck her errant curls back into place. Wasn't it only moments ago when she thought her own hair perfectly done?

"...I think we can look after her from this point." Miles didn't break stride in his speech. His date's entrance hadn't affected him in the least.

"Are you sure you're alright?" the man asked.

Hope looked into the bottomless blue of his eyes again, and her breath caught in her throat. What was the right answer to his question, anyway? *No, I'm not alright because I really want to feel you against me again. No, I'm not alright because I want to run my fingers across that adorable wisp of hair across your brow. Or no, I'm not alright because between the two men almost smothering me with their concern, I'm about to faint again.* The list of no answers could go on and on.

Instead of voicing any of these however, she nodded. She took a single step backwards, and her foot caught on the edge of the coffee table. She went sprawling against the couch. A few choice curse words skittered across her mind as she took his newly extended hand.

Miles was at her side before she could upright herself. "How much of this stuff have you had?"

He wasn't looking at her, but instead, squinted at the bottle of wine on the nearby table. Hope's face burned brightly, the flush extending to her ears and down her neck. Her fingers were still encased in the man's hand. He squeezed her hand softly, and her heart flipped.

"Perhaps we should go ahead and eat," said Maia. Hope had almost forgotten she was there. She glided to the table and poured herself a glass of wine. "Food almost ready?"

Hope turned to her blue-eyed hero. "I'm sorry, I'm being rude. We haven't been properly introduced, and I haven't thanked you for your kindness...."

Maia cut her off. "Perhaps you can stay for dinner? Right, Hope?"

"I'm sure he has better things to do." Miles glared at Maia. His words were still clipped, and his jaws almost clenched. He dragged his gaze over to where Hope's hand still rested with the man's.

"Actually, I'm starving but I wouldn't want to put you out any. Are you sure it's okay, Hope?"

Mercy. Was her heart supposed to flutter like this when he said her name?

Trying to settle her simmering blood, she nodded her head. This was kind of convenient. She would have been a third leg at her own dinner party.

"I suppose that settles it." Despite the halting way the words came out, he extended an open hand. "Miles Cavanaugh."

The man's gaze swiveled back to her ex-boyfriend, and he shook the proffered hand. "Wyatt Jamison."

A combination of horror and familiarity streaked through Hope. That's where she'd seen those eyes before. She could have kicked herself for not recognizing them sooner.

"Ju...Junior?" she stammered.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as a smile lit up his face. "You remember."

The grin he wore was playful and mocking. It caused very distinct memories to flood her mind.

Oh sweet heaven.

Junior Jamison. The boy—now man—she used to play doctor with, take baths with, had a huge crush on as a little girl, stood right here in her home.

Author Bio

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later – which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled.

Dee lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs, and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

Dee welcomes email from her readers. You can write to her at dee@deecarney.com. To learn more about her upcoming releases, please visit her on the Web at www.deecarney.com.