

Welcome to coastal town of Chances Inlet, North Carolina, home of second chances. It's New Year's Eve and the McAlister family is celebrating the double wedding of two of it's members. The whole town has gathered to party the night away. Everyone is enjoying the festivities except for one surprise guest. . .

Paige Hollister stood in the shadows of the crowded ballroom, looking on as her father toasted his new family. *As he toasted about love.* Apparently, all the love he needed was right here in this little backwater town. A town that didn't even boast its own Starbucks. She swallowed the disappointment clogging her throat and made her way out of the mansion as quickly as her stupid Jimmy Choo knock-off heels would allow.

Coming to Chances Inlet had been a colossal mistake. Not to mention a waste of frequent flyer miles and a black

Marc Jacobs dress that was well above her budget. Twenty-eight years old, and she still couldn't outrun her pathetic daddy issues.

Her plan had been to surprise him. To accept the olive branch he was offering, but on her terms. That was before she'd gotten a glimpse of him in his new element. One where he seemed sickeningly happy with a family that didn't include her.

Again.

Well, she didn't need a father she barely knew to fill any holes in her life. He could take his shiny new family and stick it where the sun didn't shine. Paige had a great career at one of the most prestigious private schools in

Chicago. She had a tight-knit circle of friends who supported her. And a new man in her life who just might turn out to be “the one.”

Lamar Hollister didn't know what he was missing.

She hurried through the mansion's heavy front door, only to crash into the back of someone waiting at the valet stand.

“Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry.” She patted his wool suit jacket much like she would soothe one of her preschoolers who'd suffered a similar fate. “I wasn't looking where I was going.”

“No worries, sweetheart,” he said as he turned, his Australian accent melting some of the thickness in her throat.

Was there a woman alive who wasn't a sucker for that accent?

A slow smile of what looked like appreciation tugged up the corners of his mouth, revealing even white teeth and a perfect set of dimples. Laugh lines fanned out beside his eyes. Long sable lashes and the dark night made it impossible to make out their color, but she'd bet money they sparkled, whatever their shade. He had that devil-may-care way about him.

“I hope you’re not in a hurry.” He gestured to the empty valet stand. “It seems they’ve vanished.”

Paige groaned dramatically. She needed to make her escape before her father discovered her here. Down Under Dude propped a shoulder against one of the pillars supporting the mansion’s portico, crossing his feet at the ankles. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“My thoughts exactly.” Except he didn’t seem as exasperated as she was. He studied her with a lazy grin. “I take it you’re headed somewhere special for midnight?”

Ugh. Midnight on New Year’s Eve. A single woman’s annual lament.

She should have stayed in Chicago. So what if Jon had a business event he had to attend tonight? At least she could have spent the evening with her friends.

Except all her friends were neatly paired up. She would have been the seventh wheel in a group of couples. Most likely, her New Year's Eve would have involved a bottle of Prosecco and Netflix. Of course, that very scenario had been the catalyst for her making tonight's absurd trip.

I should have stuck with the Prosecco.

He chuckled, making Paige suspect she might have mumbled that last part out loud. *Oh well.* She didn't care how nutty she looked or sounded. It wasn't like she was

ever going to see the guy or this little town again. Ignoring him, she pulled her cashmere wrap tighter around her bare shoulders.

“If you’d prefer to wait inside, I’m happy to pop in and let you know when the valet returns.”

“I’m fine.” No way was she going back in there. She softened her tone. There was no reason to be rude when he was acting like a gentleman. “Thank you, though.”

“My lucky night, then.”

Her knees nearly buckled at the potency of those damn dimples of his.

“You aren’t escaping for a midnight rendezvous?”

For crying out loud! What in God's name made her ask him that? She was supposed to be slipping away unobtrusively, not flirting with a dark, handsome stranger who likely could rat her out to everyone inside.

He shook his head, his knowing smile never dimming.
"No such luck. I'm headed home to bed. Alone."

Her nerve endings sparked to life at the word "alone."
She was playing with fire here, and she knew better because she was always the one to get burned.

"Early flight," he explained as if to excuse the fact that a man as potently sexy as he would be companionless on New Year's Eve.

Welcome to the party, buster, cried single women everywhere.

Paige was saved from embarrassing herself more by the sudden arrival of another man. One dressed in a uniform typical of someone who worked in law enforcement. She swiftly stepped back into the shadows. With her luck, the guy worked with her father.

“Evening, deputy,” Down Under Dude said. “You didn’t happen to see the valets out there, did you?”

The deputy removed his brimmed hat, the lights from the party inside illuminating his classic All-American features.

“They’re helping with a dead battery,” he said. “One of them should be back shortly.”

He glanced intently through the glass door.

“Are you looking for the sheriff?” the Australian asked.

“No.” The deputy shook his head. “This is a big night for his family. I don’t want to disturb him for anything.”

The bile was back in her throat. Paige must have made a sound because she could feel Down Under Dude’s gaze homing in on her. For his part, the deputy ignored them both, seemingly transfixed by something inside.

“Excuse me. I need to check on someone,” he said before pulling the door open and disappearing into the

mansion just as one of the valets sprinted up to the portico.

“So sorry to keep you waiting, sir,” he said breathlessly. “I’ll bring your car around right away.”

The kid nearly fell over himself in deference to the Australian, making Paige wonder who the guy was.

“I can wait,” Down Under Dude said. “Please fetch this lady’s car first.”

The valet shot a surprised look in Paige’s direction, his eyes squinting into the darkness she was hovering in. Clearly, he did not realize there was anyone else besides the big shot Australian waiting. She stepped out of the shadow and gave him the parking stub.

“But you just got here,” the valet protested.

Paige narrowed her eyes at him. “And now I’m leaving.”

Mumbling something she couldn’t quite make out, the valet disappeared into the parking lot again.

“That wasn’t necessary,” she said to the man beside her. “But thank you.”

He stepped a little closer, lowering his voice. “I have to admit that my imagination is working overtime. Why do I get the feeling you’re running from the law?”

A very unladylike snort escaped her lips. *If he only knew.*

“Nothing quite so dramatic,” she replied.

“Did your date stand you up? Tell me his name, and I’ll take care of him for you. He has no excuse.”

She couldn’t hold back the ridiculous grin his teasing brought to her face.

He stilled beside her. “I doubt there’s a man alive who could resist that smile.”

Her throat grew tight once again. He’d be surprised how wrong he was. There was one man. A man who had no trouble resisting her. And he was inside. With his new family.

Paige swayed slightly in her heels. Her companion of the past few minutes instantly wrapped warm fingers around her elbow to steady her. Her entire arm sizzled

beneath his touch. His sharp intake of breath told her he felt it too.

The tires of her rental car squealed on the pavement as the valet brought it to a halt in front of them. She hesitated a long moment before attempting to pull away, but he tightened his grip slightly.

“Allow me,” he said softly. “We can’t have you falling down the steps.”

A stronger woman would have asserted her independence, but the truth was, it was nice not having to stand on her own for once. She allowed him to guide her to the driver’s side of her car, where the valet stood holding the door open. Paige fumbled for her bag to grab

a tip, but her Dark Knight had already pulled some bills from his pocket and was handing them to the teenager.

“Have a good night, ma’am,” the valet said. “I’ll just go get your car now, Mr. Gillette.”

Paige drew in a calming breath as she slid into the driver’s seat. She turned her head to the side and nearly collided with the mysterious Mr. Gillette’s lips. Not that she would have complained. They looked as sinful as the rest of him. (Describe) But this could never be one of those nights that ended that way. Not when she needed to put as much distance between her and the North Carolina coast as quickly as possible.

He hesitated for a long beat, seeming to have his own internal debate about whether to pursue her or not. She quickly made the decision for him.

“I really need to be going,” she whispered, hating the regret she heard in her words.

He nodded and slowly pulled away.

“I hope the new year brings you everything you wish for,” he said, then gently closed her door.

Paige didn't dare hesitate. She put the car in drive and hurried away before she could do a second foolish thing tonight.

Intrigued? Paige's story will be available late 2022 or early 2023. Be sure to add tracy@tracysolheim.com to your favorites so you won't miss any emails about the book! In the meantime, if you haven't been to Chances Inlet or met the McAlister family, be sure to read Gavin

McAlister's story in [Back to Before](#), Miles McAlister's story in [All They Ever Wanted](#), and Ryan McAlister's story in [Second Chance Christmas](#). Lamar Hollister, Paige's estranged father, has a big role in all three books.

Talk to you soon,

Tracy