

Mr.  
*Sandman*

*A Novella*

*Regina Rudd Merrick*



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## CHAPTER ONE



*Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

— Albert Einstein

Taylor Fordham stared at her computer screen, eyes glazed over as she scanned facts and figures. Those numbers equaled business for Pilot Oaks, the beautiful South Carolina antebellum mansion-turned-bed-and-breakfast and event center owned by the Crawford family.

Once again, she'd stayed up too late last night, watching her Sci-fi show, *StarPort: SP-1*, imagining how her favorite characters could end up together.

What was wrong with her? She loved her job. After Mike—*gotta get my mind off that*—she chose to stay in the Pawleys Island area, for Pilot Oaks. Nearby friends helped, but finding her niche in the hospitality industry and working for the Crawfords at their B&B made it worth staying.

“Excuse me ...”

Her head whipped up when a masculine voice filtered through her brain fog. Taylor looked around the bank of minia-

ture decorative snowmen on her desk, her nod to holiday décor. The heat on her cheeks felt anything but professional.

*Way to go, Taylor.*

“I’m so sorry.” She rose, smiling, her insides doing something weird when the brown-eyed, dark-haired young man smiled back.

*He’s cute.*

“Not a problem.” He gave her a half-smile. “I’m Ian Rutledge, here for the chef interview?”

*Okay, he’s more than cute ...*

Her mind went blank for a second, then it all came back to her. She closed her eyes for a second to re-group. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“There you go, apologizing again.” He raised his eyebrow in amusement.

“I’m ...” She grimaced. “I’ll let the Crawfords know you’re here.” She walked away before she could embarrass herself completely.

*It’s the lack of sleep. I’m never this scattered.*

She followed her nose to the scent of gingerbread baking.

One thing you could say about the Crawfords, they believed in doing Christmas BIG. For some reason, Taylor could handle it with them. Robert and Linda Crawford, their daughter, Susan Harris, and the cook, Prudie Matthews, all looked up when Taylor entered the kitchen.

“Is he here?” Prudie asked.

“Mr. Rutledge is in the reception area. Shall I show him to your office or here?” It was a chef’s position, after all. Wouldn’t they want to quiz him about his specialty? Um, cooking?

Robert narrowed his eyes at the spry woman. “Now Prudie, are you sure you want to share your kitchen with a young whipper-snapper?”

The older woman laughed. “I think I can manage. The break-

fast crowd is my favorite anyway. Large groups are getting to be too much for this old woman.”

“You are not old.” Linda shook her head, salt-and-pepper bob swinging. With one look, she put Prudie in her place. “You’re less than twenty years older than me, and I plan to be a vibrant seventy-something when I get there.”

“Sweetie.” Prudie patted Linda’s hand. “I’m old enough to be your mama and Susan’s grandmamma, so don’t argue. Besides, I might just have plans of my own.” She twisted her lips in a smile and squeezed each woman’s hand.

*Prudie? Blushing?* She had been such a comfort to Taylor, possibly because many years ago, she’d also lost the love of her life.

“Let’s have him come back here.” Robert sought approval from the ladies.

“Sounds good.” Prudie smiled. “Bring him on back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Taylor retraced her steps, then detoured through the servant’s back entrance to the study. She wondered what Mr. Rutledge would think when she appeared behind him, seemingly from the solid-oak paneling. She touched the hidden door, and the spring-loaded apparatus opening silently.

No need to worry about the man being shocked or surprised. He was asleep.



## STARPORT: SP-1



Linc knew he shouldn't expect things to work out. When had they?  
But Alex was here, in his arms, where, he surmised, she belonged.

Now to figure out how to keep her there.