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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Enjoy two novellas connected to Regina Rudd Merrick's A Southern Breeze series in one convenient volume. Both of these stories were included in multi-author collections: "Pawleys Aisle" (Coastal Promises) and "Mr. Sandman" (Candy Cane Wishes and Saltwater Dreams). Now you can complete your collection of A Southern Breeze stories with this novella duo, Carolina Connections.*



# *Pawleys* Aisle

*A Novella*

*Regina Rudd Merrick*



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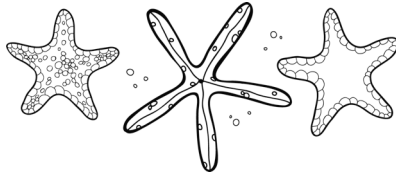
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## CHAPTER ONE



“Oh, Ms. Bertie, why didn't you tell your grandson what we were about?” I know that raising my eyes to heaven and talking to a lady who's dead and buried won't get me anywhere, but if it makes me feel better, why not try it?

Honestly, the first time I met Marc McCallum, my first instinct was to try to draw him out of his shell. I mean, he's a writer. I get it. He's serious. I get that, too, I suppose. But shouldn't using your imagination for a living be fun? The wedding vendor in me, and comments from his beloved Granny Bert, notes that he is single and seemingly proud of it. If I hadn't embraced singleness after my experience with Daniel Rogers, I might notice his good looks in that smart-guy, slightly-athletic-but-nerdy sort of way, which I usually find attractive...But sworn off men I have, so that's that.

Now what to say? I'm here, at the front door, letter in hand, and I'm speechless. And mad. “Okay, Lord, give me a little calm before I make a fool of myself.” As soon as I knock on the door, I hear frantic barking, and then a distinctly masculine voice shout, “Quiet, Muffin!”

I have to snicker. It's one thing to hear an elderly woman



calling her sixty-five pound Golden Retriever “Muffin,” but McCallum?

The door opens and Muffin immediately pushes her way around her new master and sits in front of me, waiting for her hug. “Hey, girl! How's it going?”

“Miss Prince.” He stands there, all six-foot-lean of him, shoulder hunched on the door frame with his arms crossed, as if I'm a bother he could do without. He looks down at Muffin and frowns a bit. I wonder if he's jealous of the rapport between me and this big hunk of golden sweetness.

Probably.

“Mr. McCallum. Do you have a moment? We need to talk.” Rattling the paper in his face is tempting, but I'm trying to use my big-girl manners.

The twitch of his lips shows me he has to think about it. Get over yourself, bro. He seriously looks at his watch as if he's in the middle of peace talks or something. Then he scratches nervously at his beard and comes to himself. “Come in. Would you care for something to drink?”

Surprise, surprise. He has big-boy manners. “Uh, sure. Water or tea is fine.”

“Good, because it's all I've got.”

This place hasn't been dusted in weeks. Ms. Bertie would be scandalized.

He draws in a breath, bringing me back to the present. “Hot or cold?”

“Water?” I can't resist.

“I meant tea.”

Wise-guy. “Cold is fine, if you have it.”

He pulled the tea pitcher out of the refrigerator. “Unless you want some milk that expired three weeks ago.”

“No thanks.”

“I suppose you got the notice.”

His tea-pouring skills are decent. At least he keeps the

kitchen sanitary, and Muffin's food and water bowls are sufficiently filled for this time of day. Who am I? A representative of dog-protective services?

"I did. And I thought it was time we had a talk about what your grandmother, Ms. Bertie, and I were up to."

"That's an interesting way to put it. Knowing Granny Bert, there's no telling what she put you up to, and no telling what wild schemes you roped her into."

Cut to the heart. "Now listen here, Ms. Bertie was a sweet, gentle soul who never led anyone astray, and I'd like to think the reason we clicked was that we were a lot alike." Pressure. Right there. In the middle of my chest. And the pesky tears. They only come when I'm frustrated or hurt to the core. Right now I'm not sure which I am more – hurt or frustrated. Muffin pads over to me and leans against my leg. What a good dog. "I know. I miss her, too." Sniff.

Now he looks frightened. Tears often affect men in such a way. You work in the wedding biz, and you know all the signs. A woman even hints at crying, and every male in the vicinity gets glassy-eyed and red in the face. For some reason, this little bit of knowledge helps.

"I'm sorry to mess up your plans, but I'm trying to work here, and if I have people in and out of the garden at all hours, I can't settle down to actually typing the words."

"Don't you think 'at all hours' is overstating it a bit?"

At least he has the grace to look sheepish as he holds his hands up in a defensive move.

"Maybe. The problem is I never know when a spark of inspiration is going to hit. It might hit right in the middle of one of your soirees, and then I get distracted by music and noise, and I'm sunk."

"Is inspiration really that finicky?" Who knew? I was under the impression writers could just sit and type away, a novel springing from their fingertips.

He has a nice laugh, but that is definitely not the point right now.

“Yes, it can be that finicky.”

He gestures to the kitchen table and I sit down, jiggling my glass of tea nervously. I seem to have an unreasonable need to make sure my ice cubes do not stick together. Muffin flops down at our feet. Maybe she is playing the role of mediator.

“Mr. McCallum, I don't want to be a nuisance neighbor.”

“And I appreciate it.”

He's sitting there, looking at me. Now, could I please be a reasonable adult about this?

“When I bought the Chapel, it took every bit of money I had saved, and then some. I borrowed the rest based on my business plan, which your grandmother helped me to develop.”

Ah, he looks surprised. His little granny wasn't smart enough to be a financial adviser?

“Granny Bert?” His eyes widen and he seems stunned.

“Do you have another grandmother in the neighborhood?”

“No, my other grandmother lives in Columbia.”

“Bless her heart.” How can anyone live inland, when there is this entire coast in South Carolina?

His lips curve into a rueful grin...“Tell me about it. Why do you think I'm here instead of there?”

“You grew up inland?” Could explain his grouchy demeanor, singleness notwithstanding.

“I did. Granny Bert's house was home in the summers, though.”

“She talked about you a lot.” Should I tell him one of her greatest wishes was to meet her great-grandchildren before she died, and that she despaired of him ever producing an heir at the rate he was going? Probably not.

“Did she?” His face softens. “She was something else.”

I know I'm frowning, but I can't stop. “I'm confused.”

“About what?”

“If Ms. Bertie was so important to you, then why would you accuse her of 'putting me up' to something? She was an angel in disguise, if you ask me.”

Something about his face seems to close off suddenly. A little stab of guilt? Funny how in the six months I've lived here I never met him until two weeks ago, after Ms. Bertie's death.

“I'm sorry.” I finish my tea and rise to set the glass on the counter. “I didn't come here to discuss your relationship with your grandmother, although I would have thought you would be interested in her business investments.”

“Investments? You mean she actually invested in your business?” He slumps in his chair, closes his eyes, and sighs.

“Well, yes. It wasn't much, but she wanted to be a part of getting couples off to a good start. Her investment was letting me use the gardens for receptions and pictures, and other events. She didn't invest money. She invested her time and talents in me.”