

Sweet Home Carolina by T. Lynn Ocean
Partial Excerpt Chapter 1

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They lined the round mahogany bar at Frankie's Sports Pub like a display of exciting new releases in a bookstore. Men, and lots of them. Drinking and eating and talking back to the flickering television screens in front of them.

A titillating variety of males, appetizing as trays of decadent chocolates in a gourmet candy store. The type of flavorful truffles that were meant to be savored on the palette until the very end. And in my dating circles, there always was a sweet and quick ending. Long-term relationships were to be avoided, like day-old sushi and last season's fashions.

Sitting at a nearby table and waiting for Sheila to return from the bathroom, I covertly studied the masculine lineup. Just when my imagination shifted into overdrive, my boss walked up to the bar and abruptly interrupted my daydream.

Aaron Ackworth founded Shine Advertising and Public Relations some forty years ago, and tonight's party was his way of thanking the team for our latest client acquisition. The Frankie's account, all fifty-six locations, was enough of a victory to mandate a celebration for the entire office. Aaron had personally recruited me from another agency, and I felt a strong sense of loyalty to the man who was a legend in the industry. A strong leader, he treated his employees fairly and, almost like a protective father might watch over his children, he looked out for us. Clutching a bottle of Corona, Aaron melted back into the crowd. I returned my attention to the men encircling the bar and wondered what each of them might be like in bed. Slow, sensual and teasing. Roughly passionate. Or something enjoyably between.

I studied the pair at the far end of the bar. Animated as they watched a game, they cheered for opposite teams. Both wore quality suits and sported salon haircuts, but one was GQ cover material while the other was more suited to Outdoor Life. Blended into one, they would make the perfect man.

"Marry me, Jaxie," someone whispered into my ear, the tickle of his breath jolting me from my reverie. Mark, a coworker and former fling, grinned down at me. And this was probably the sixth or seventh time he'd proposed. The shock effect wore off weeks ago, after I learned he proposed to everyone who broke up with him.

"You know I don't believe in matrimony, Mark. But thanks for asking."

He slid into Sheila's vacant chair. "Helluva a bash, huh? I love this job. Where else can two people work their asses off to strike gold with a new account, and the entire office gets credit?"

Mark always thought he did more work on a project than anyone else did, and that he alone was responsible for ninety-five percent of Shine's client roster. His charm was the reason I broke my no-dating-coworkers rule and his ego was the reason I reinstated it. But the breakup remained cordial. We are advertising and PR people. We love what we do. We're clever. Thick-skinned. Always on the lookout for the next trend. And, above all else, we do what it takes to close the deal. Business is business and dating is business.

"For the record,"—I raised an eyebrow at him—"we all worked our asses off to land Frankie's."

Before he could argue, Sheila returned to reclaim her chair. Mark kissed us both on the cheek and sauntered off in pursuit of more available prey.

"He ask you to marry him again?" my best friend said. Like me, she was a senior account executive for Shine.

I nodded. "Yep."

She popped a pretzel into her mouth. "Gotta love his persistence."

"Yeah, right," I said, giving her a look. "About as much as you gotta love the city smog."

Sheila's dark golden eyes narrowed as she leaned close to talk over the noise. "Jax, you love everything about Atlanta. Smog included."

I smiled. She was right. I wouldn't trade my home for anything. Big-city living energized me. It was the massive buildings and constant movement, and the anonymity of living with four million neighbors. It was shopping at Nordstrom, barhopping in Buckhead and ordering Chinese delivery at one o'clock in the morning. The theater and art, the live jazz, and

the unique taste of boiled peanuts purchased from a street vendor.

From the homeless junkie begging for spare change to the extravagant five-star hotel where scented toilet paper was folded for easy retrieval, a big city represented the entire gamut of humankind from one extreme to the other. And living in the midst of it induced the survivalist instinct. Just like Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the first order of business upon arriving in Atlanta was food, water, and shelter. Then came safety. Park in well lit areas, pay attention to your surroundings, and lock your deadbolts.

I was well versed in the third level of the pyramid: love, acceptance and affection. My social life was jam-packed and I did okay in the esteem department, too. I was nowhere near the top of the pyramid, self actualization, but I was having too much fun to worry about analyzing the meaning of life. My mother once had it all figured out and thought that life meant marriage and children and hard work. That theory left her abandoned and broke with stretch marks and a baby girl to raise. I had no desire to follow in her footsteps.

"You're right," I admitted to Sheila. "I wouldn't trade living here for anything."

Justin Connor, the vice president of market research, appeared at our table. "Hello, ladies. Enjoying the party?" He looked like he always did, wearing a dark suit and white oxford button down shirt. The only thing that changed from day to day was the color of his tie. If he wanted to get really wild, he'd wear one with subtle stripes.

"Absolutely," Sheila said, raising her glass to him. "Anytime someone else is picking up the tab, I enjoy the party."

He smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. "Care to dance, Jaxie? The band started playing upstairs."

"No thanks. I, uh, didn't wear my dancing shoes." Although I would have enjoyed a dance, Justin was the last man I'd choose for a spin around the floor.

"Okay," he said, dropping his hand. "But you two should get up there before all the food is gone. The teriyaki chicken is delicious."

We nodded.

"Well, then. See you later."

"Sure," I said, and as soon as he moved on, rolled my eyes and stuck a finger in my mouth like I wanted to puke.

Sheila shot a frown my way. "The man just wanted to dance. Cut him some slack."

"You dance with him, then."

"He didn't ask me," she countered.

"He's socially challenged."

"What are you talking about? Half the women in our office would jump at the chance to dance with him."

"Hello?" I said. "Can you say boring?"

She shrugged. "You don't like him because he's not eye candy."

I shrugged back. "Can't tell if he's candy or not through those ugly glasses and all the bean-counter suits."

"Well maybe"—she smiled slyly—"you should remove the specs and the clothes to find out. That man is hot for you, woman!"

"Give me a break."

"Well, besides not being your usual spray-tanned, muscle-bound pretty boy, I think the real reason you avoid Justin is because you're afraid you might actually like him. A settle-down-with kind of like."

"That's ridiculous. I have no intention of settling down with any man. I mean, look where it got my mother. Even my grandmother got dumped, or so I'm told, and that was way before divorce was an acceptable part of society. The women in my family aren't blessed with good man-choosing genes."

"Maybe not, but at least you could spend some time to get to know Justin. The only guys you hook up with are the ones you know you'll dump soon. After you've had your fun and want to move on to something new. Which typically takes,"—she studied the ceiling to think—"about three weeks."

"So it would be better to do it your way?" I said. "Date a guy long enough to get to know him, but go out with two or three other ones at the same time?"

"I'm not actually with them all at the same time," she countered.

I raised my glass in toast. "Good point."

We finished the bowl of pretzels and debated whether or not to go upstairs for some real food.

"I still think you should get to know our marketing VP a little better," Sheila said. "You might be pleasantly surprised."

I was about to remind her that I didn't date coworkers, boring or otherwise, when her eyes moved to a spot over my shoulder. I turned to see Aaron approaching.

He stopped at our table. "Jaxie, do you have a minute?"

"Sure."

We moved outside, onto a covered balcony with a view of Buckhead's busy streets, and when the door shut behind us, the decibel level dropped to a muffled hum. We walked to the railing and admired a mesmerizing spread of lights.

He pulled a cigar out of his breast pocket. "Mind if I light up?"

"No sir."

I studied the flow of headlights and taillights, the city's pulsing arteries and veins, while my boss tended to his Cohiba Cuban. Using a cutter, he clipped off one end and, with a monogrammed torch lighter, puffed a few times to get it going.

"At the board meeting this morning," he said through a mouthful of smoke, "the partners approved my nomination for our annual pro bono project."

I nodded, wondering where the conversation was headed and why he had singled me out. Our firm was one of the few in the country that did a pro bono marketing and public relations campaign each year. The effort produced a great tax write-off and invaluable publicity for Shine. Previous pro bono projects ranged from a national organ donation awareness campaign to a series of radio and television spots encouraging people to vote.

"We are going to save a small town," he continued, exhaling a cloud of rich smoke into the night. "Rumton has been slowly deteriorating for years and years, and now it's in real trouble. Farming has dried up. The downtown district is deserted. Kids have grown up and gotten the hell out of dodge. The population is dwindling and basically, the town is broke. The remaining few hundred residents can barely afford to keep their roads maintained and their school operational. If nothing is done, there won't be anything left to call a town."

"Rumton? Where is that?"

"On the South Carolina coast," he said, studying my face. "And we are going to figure out a way to revitalize it."

"Um, that's great. It sounds like a worthwhile project," I said, feeling a nervous twitch flare up in my left eyelid. "But what does any of this have to do with me?"

A chunk of ash fell from the end of his cigar and landed between our feet. Almost immediately, a gust of wind nudged it off the edge of the balcony and it disappeared into the darkness.

"You are going to head up the project, Jaxie."

"Me? Head up the project?" I was too busy to lead a pro bono project. "You mean from our office, right? We'll send out a few interns and I'll be their guidance contact?"

He chuckled before rolling the cigar between his fingers and taking another pull. "Well, yes, you'll get your two interns. But they'll be working from the office as your support staff. You're going to Rumton. For a month, or maybe more. You'll be there however long it takes to scope things out and devise a plan."

Concrete moved beneath my feet and the air thinned. I was stunned. I gripped the railing for support. He was sending me to a backwoods town in the middle of nowhere for a month or more? The muscle in my eyelid spasmodically danced for a full three seconds... (continued)

TAKE A SUCCESSFUL CAREERWOMAN WHO LOVES EVERYTHING METROPOLITAN, ADD A SMALL QUIRKY TOWN THAT DOESN'T HAVE DRY MARTINIS OR DAY SPAS, MIX IN A MURDER, A TREASURE, AND SOME SPICY PIRATE HISTORY. READ AND ENJOY! PICK UP A COPY OF *SWEET HOME CAROLINA* AT YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL BOOKSTORE.

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