

Southern Ranch Romance

Chapter 1: Walker

Before her death, my mother always said, "Never turn left in Memphis." I'd ask her why, and she'd say in her gnarliest southern drawl, "Because then you'll end up in Arkansas."

She grew up in the southern state, on a farm that produced more dust than corn. The second she was able to, she fled to the city and never looked back. Except for one time, on a childhood vacation when we drove home through Arkansas. She rolled down her window and spat on the cursed ground, closing her eyes for the rest of the trip.

"You're going to love Arkansas," says my real estate agent, as I drive toward it.

Why did I buy a vacation home in my mother's least favorite place? It's been nearly a decade since she passed, and some days I struggle to remember what she looked like. There's always an image in my head, of Mom smiling at me from one of my various birthdays. But each day, it grows hazier, until I can only see the outlines, the colors. Small details like the curve of her smile and the roundness of her cheeks only fade. Mostly, I miss her laughter. And as I drive for the small town of Dooley, which barely shows up on a map, I know she's laughing at me.

But mostly, I bought the ranch because of the divorce.

"Dooley is the cutest town," says Andrea, my real estate agent. The two of us had been scouring over a map of the American South, looking for the perfect ranch. I didn't want anything too big, but with enough land to expand down the road. When you work in finance, you can never not think about finance. Visualizing the wooden house and the

barn over fields of grain, I conjured all sorts of ideas on how to monetize the land. Supplying a bakery with fresh dough, offering pony rides to children at the stables, hosting film productions shooting a western. Do they even make Westerns anymore?

Of course, the property isn't mine yet. If marriage taught me anything, it's that if something seems too good to be true, it most definitely is.

"How's the owner?" I ask, driving on an endless road. It almost looks like a video game, with the same backdrop for miles. I've been driving for over an hour and I still see the same flat land before me. "He's not a loon, is he?"

"I don't think they like to use the word loon in Arkansas."

Andrea sometimes takes things too literally, but it makes her a wonderful part of the real estate community.

"Is he going to send me on a wild goose chase?"

"From what I know, the owner wants to make sure you're the right person to buy his ranch. It's been in the family for generations, since before the Great Depression."

Thank you, Wikipedia. If I had anything of my family's since before 1930, I'd probably be hesitant to give it away, too. But I'm also an asshole from the finance world, so you can find my deepest sympathies somewhere in the backseat.

"I just don't like games," I tell Andrea. "I don't like jumping through hoops."

Misty made me jump every day. Like a damn dog begging for a bacon strip, she dangled it over my nose. I rolled over each time she asked me to, wishing this time would be the time she finally gave it to me. Charlie Brown, I feel your pain.

She wasn't the worst wife. Misty liked to go out and have fun, even years into the relationship. Things never got stale or boring with her. That was actually the problem. She always needed a good time. She always needed to spice things up. The second life grew routine, Misty would roll the dice and move her piece on the board. She could never sit still and wait. She could never work up to something. It was instant gratification, or she was out.

For seven years, I fulfilled her every request. I entertained her whims. I financed trips around the world, access to VIP lounges and concert halls. I introduced her to celebrities and billionaires, to some of the most influential people in the world. I cashed in my every favor, and I spent them all on her.

Well, eventually I ran out of gifts to give. So, she ran out on me. What's that phrase about the cookie's crumble?

"It seems pretty cut and dry to me," says Andrea, bringing me back from my thoughts. "He wants to meet you, shake your hand, and if you seem like a city slicker, he won't sell."

Looking down, I really wish I hadn't worn my best jeans today. Something covered in dirt would be more appropriate.

I really am a city slicker. Memphis was my whole life, when I wasn't traveling with Misty. The bars and the barbecue and the rock 'n roll, it runs through my veins. It's an integral part of who I am. But with Misty gone and my bed just a little bit bigger than before, I needed a change. An escape. A little space to call my own, with no painful

memories. A vacation spot to disappear to after each quarter. Somewhere Misty has never been, and will never ever be.

"Don't worry about getting your hands dirty. Good luck in Arkansas," says Andrea, before hanging up.

Property of Tony Clemente Jr