

Chasing Her Trail

By

Keri Ford

Chapter One

Jessie stood on the front porch, two steps back from the loose board that had threatened to splinter last time she'd stepped on it. It was her invisible barrier and current protector. Or maybe in this case, that crumbling board was *his* protector.

Heart throbbing in her throat, anger coursing through her veins, she had to remain behind the step or else she might claw his eyes out.

Damn garden. She had always imagined looking her best the next time she saw Quinn Flannigan. A passing bit of beauty to make him sorry for the way he'd treated her. Not that she was a stunning model by any means, but at least shaved legs and clean clothes making her *feel* beautiful would have been nice for this moment.

As Quinn drew closer, happy-go-lucky smile on his slender lips she'd like to make fat, little bounce in his step like he ruled the world, she rather wished she wasn't staring at him at all. She'd just as soon as rot in hell than speak with this...this ass.

She put her hand up, halting him on the path to her home. She would scrub every single one of those stone steps he stood on with bleach and for good measure, sanitize the air. It would be worth sparing her few cleaning supplies to remove all trace of his presence. "Get the hell off my property."

"*Jessie*," he cooed and the purr from the back of his throat rolling over his tongue did nothing to her.

Well, nothing *pleasurable*. Itched her to step over that rotting board, that was for damn sure. But doing so would mean she would have to touch him. She nearly shuddered at the thought of that alone, but refused to give in, would not let him see anything about her. "Get. Off. My. Property."

The screen door at her back creaked. Wind from it swinging wide and then slamming closed with a hair-raising crack slapped against her back. Air collected in her lungs and held

there while she hoped and prayed the door would not fall off the hinges from the rough treatment. Thankfully it held.

Her cousin, Tiffany, was at her side, rifle set against her shoulder, bullet being clicked into place and the supposed charming smile—though Jessie rather thought it smarmy—finally faltered on Quinn’s face.

Tiffany eyed down the new gun her husband had bought her a month ago. The gun her cousin had just learned to handle and shoot straight. Jessie would well imagine she had the sights targeted directly on Quinn’s balls. Cruel to some, but perfectly fine with Jessie.

Tiffany rolled her head, cracking a single joint in her neck and reset her sights. “What do you know, Mike was right. This thing is useful after all.”

“Mike...Gable?” Quinn asked, his color paling to a satisfying shade of sickly white.

Everyone in these parts knew Mike was the local law. And everyone, including Quinn who hadn’t lived here in some five years, also knew Tiffany’s whims and decisions ran about as hot and cold as weather in South Arkansas. You never really knew what you were gonna get, and if you weren’t happy with it, it’d change in an instant anyway.

Confidence curled like warm, soothing liquid through Jessie’s tight muscles. She knew one day she’d likely run into Quinn again. This moment just turned, well, *awesome* at the sight of him squirming his legs like he was trying not to shit his pants. “Yes. They’ve been married for six months now.”

“Seven.” Tiffany corrected, one of those dreamy love boat smiles curved her lips and made Jessie’s heart squeeze in painful delight.

“Right. Seven.” Jessie’s middle was cramping, stomach contents rolling and churning her all-over-the-place emotions. Heartache. Pride. Fear. Confidence. It all twisted her earlier lunch around in her belly, but as Quinn continued to back away, it was worth putting up with. Quinn had never been afraid of her and he knew damn good and well if she told Tiffany to put a bullet between his legs, Tiffany would do it without hesitation. “Now leave.”

He didn’t leave. “I have a proposition for you.”

The cracking in her chest somehow shattered even further. Ribs on the edge of breaking. Lungs gasped for a way to keep breathing. She would not crumble before him. Would not. “Not a snowy chance in hell.”

The other man, who had emerged from Quinn's car, and had so far been leaning against the side of the vehicle all this time, stepped forward. Jessie raised her chin higher, wanting this man gone too.

"Quinn." His voice was strong, powerful and it offered no argument. "Get in the car."

Quinn obeyed and a sliver of relief eased through Jessie. Though not much as the man moved closer. He looked nothing of Quinn. His dark hair was neatly cut short. Silver rimmed glasses sat on his nose. His build was slender, but shoulders back. The way he carried himself was all very subtle, but she was no fool. His steps may be careful and slow, but one couldn't be too different from the company you keep. *Birds of a feather...* and all that. "And you can leave too."

"Ms. McBride. Please. Just a moment of your time is all I ask for."

She shook her head. "No."

His eyes behind his glasses softened, looked heavy. Lips parted and his proud shoulders drooped. He looked momentarily broken, as though a piece of him just chipped off and hit the ground. She shouldn't care. She didn't want to care, but as he walked forward anyway, the sadness that had briefly hung his body tucked away, all evidence of it was gone. "I have an offer for you. Something I think we can both benefit from."

She gestured toward the car with a tilt of her head. "What is he to you?"

He slipped his hands in his straight front khaki pant pockets. "A man I don't much care for first, an employee second, and third, my cousin."

Jessie's eyes narrowed, fearful he'd only listed Quinn in that order for her sake, to earn her trust and confidence. It wouldn't be the first time a smooth set of lines had been tossed at her. It would not however, sway her. Carefully spoken words hadn't budged her in years, they weren't going to start now.

The nose of Tiffany's rifle that had begun to lower shot back up to quick and steady aim as the man stepped closer still.

Jessie wanted to rub the chill off her arms, but she wouldn't. She knew it wasn't from the brisk winter air, but instead from this man closing in on her space, invading her property and home. She wanted him gone. Now. "You keep poor company and even poorer employees. You can leave."

He stopped his walking, and a long breath slid out of him in a simple, quiet exhale of exhaustion. “Well, thing is, he belongs to my grandfather’s sister. And there’s not much I wouldn’t do for my grandpa.” His palms flashed up, shoulders shrugged and Jessie got the idea fairly clearly.

Also he mentioned the one thing to smack her in the gut, fizzle off a piece of her firm resolve. He mentioned family. His grandpa. And in those two things, he and Jessie agreed. There wasn’t too much she wouldn’t do for her dad, even with her daddy in the ground for nearly a decade now. “Get that piece of trash off my property and then we can talk.” Jessie spun on her heel and marched inside her home.

She leaned against the wall as the door swung closed. Breath was gone from her chest, vomit threatened—then again, that would surely clear the lump in her throat. But it was no use. The past churned and rolled. The memories of those months of empty blackness coated through her and left a chill in its wake. She ran, zig-zagging through the maze of the house, slapped her hands on the back door and sent it flying off the hinges with a crack for the second time this year.

Just as she hit railing, her stomach clenched and she heaved into the bushes as the whine of an engine rumbled down her drive.

“Jessie?” Tiffany called from somewhere in the house, her voice drawing closer as she continued calling her name.

Jessie coughed the last of it out, wishing the blackness was as easy to be rid of. Even though the memories were receding, they were always there, lurking in the back of her mind, ready to take her again. “Out here.”

Tiffany rushed out, ponytail swinging as she glanced at the door in the yard, the mess and shook her head. “Bastard.”

“Agreed.” Jessie nodded.

Tiffany’s hands were on her hips and she stared in the house, toward the front. “If he had been alone, I think I would have shot him. Not like anybody would have missed him if he died.”

“True, not anyone here anyway, but he’s gone now.”

“And the other is coming back. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Jessie allowed Tiffany to guide her inside and déjà vu crumbled down around her. When Jessie should have been taking care of an underage Tiffany just a year after putting both their

parents in the ground, but had been into much of a shock, then fog, to do anything but be led around for months.

She straightened, pulled her hand from Tiffany's, refusing to become that helpless, lost person again. She'd crawled her way out of it and she would not allow the look of that damn Quinn Flenning send her back. She was Jessie McBride and whoever this man was coming back would know it when he left. "I need a shower and something pretty to wear."

A smile fixed on Tiffany's face. "I'll find you something."

Tiffany started out the back, to her house next door but Jessie stopped her. "Get your hot rollers too." Her palms rubbed against her thighs. "And your razor and—"

Tiffany laughed. "You just come with me. That'll be ten times faster. Rebecca is home and between the three of us, we'll have you dressed and back before he can even make it into town."

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