

Chapter One

Becca Sue Ellsworth's arms felt empty. It was an ache that went clear to her soul.

From her apartment window above her bookshop and antiques boutique, Becca's Attic, she gazed out at Main Street, darkened now except for streetlamps casting shadowy arcs over the two-lane road. There was no traffic. The diagonal parking spaces in front of the sidewalks were deserted. Hope Valley was one of those small Southern towns that rolled up the sidewalks at dusk.

A deep sense of aloneness pressed against her chest. She'd just spent the evening with her three best friends—more affectionately known as the Texas Sweethearts—and their families. She wasn't normally given to envy, and it made her feel small to covet her girlfriends' children, pregnancies and happy families.

Oh, it wasn't as though she begrudged them their happiness. She just wanted a piece of it for herself.

Younger by six months than Sunny, Donetta and Tracy Lynn, Becca had recently celebrated her thirtieth birthday. The magic number, it seemed, when a woman's biological clock began to gong like a cowbell being beaten by a sledgehammer.

The incessant reminder was almost deafening.

She didn't have the money for artificial insemination, which Tracy Lynn had tried. And she didn't have a husband like Sunny and Donetta—and, of course, Tracy Lynn. Tracy Lynn had practically been forced into a marriage of convenience, which had ultimately turned out to be her heart's every dream come true.

Sighing, Becca looked past her own reflection in the window and caught a glimpse of movement below. Her heart jumped into her throat, and with a silent yelp, she quickly ducked behind the silky Priscilla curtains.

Colby Flynn.

The streetlight illuminated him as he walked down the sidewalk and paused outside his law office, which was right across the street from Becca's Attic. He started to insert the key, then turned suddenly, looking directly up at Becca's window.

She hit the wall beside the window with a thud, flattening her back against the blue forget-me-nots speckled across the antique wallpaper, and held her breath. It was a wonder she hadn't wet her pants.

That was all she needed—to get caught staring at her ex-boyfriend.

Lord, the man could still make her heart bump against her ribs. More so lately. And all because of a silly promise made when they were both drunk on their butts.

Shoot, he probably didn't even remember. It'd been seven years.

They'd dated, even tried living together for a couple of months one summer when Colby took a semester off from law school, but they'd soon found out that they were total opposites who drove each other nuts. She'd been a scatterbrained free spirit. He'd been a neatnik, stuffy sort who hadn't appreciated the fact that clothes lying about on the floor was an excellent way to preserve the life of the carpet.

Maybe she'd scared him off. At twenty-three, she'd been going through her I-want-to-get-married-and-have-babies phase. Colby was set on building a future in the field of law, not housekeeping. He'd told her he couldn't give her what she wanted, that he had to let her go so she could find someone else who could fulfill her dream, give her the things she deserved—commitment and family.

Even now a wave of embarrassment washed over her as she recalled the pitiful plea in her voice: “What if that doesn't happen? I'm all that's left of my family, Colby. What if I turn thirty someday and haven't found my soul mate?”

“You *will* turn thirty,” he'd teased. “And I'm sure a smarter man than me will have snapped you up way sooner than that.”

“But what if?” she'd persisted.

“Then we'll have a baby together,” he'd said, wiping the tears from her face, her alcohol-induced misery clearly too much for him to resist. “No strings attached. You'll have your family, I'll take care of the finances.”

Well, her birthday had already passed. And because Colby's office was right across the street from her shop and apartment, she was hyperaware of his comings and goings.

Every time it looked as though he might make the trek across the street, an adrenaline surge nearly knocked her to her knees.

Did he remember?

Neither of them had ever mentioned the words they'd said to each other seven years ago, words that made sense in the midst of an alcoholic haze, but could only be deemed ridiculous in the sober light of day.

Several times lately, though, when their paths crossed, Colby had given her a teasing, flirtatious wink and a knowing look.

What was up with that? And what in the world did it mean? She was becoming a wreck obsessing over it.

Gathering her nerve, Becca carefully inched to the side and sneaked a peek out the window. Colby was no longer on the sidewalk and a light inside his office indicated he'd gone in.

Both relief and disappointment washed over her.

Criminy, Becca Sue. Get a grip.

Most likely, she was merely projecting her own wishes onto Colby—thinking his overt glances in her direction carried undertones of their youthful baby pact.

Annoyed with herself at the silliness, she crossed the room, climbed into bed and snatched up a knitting magazine from her nightstand.

Neither she nor Colby would consider hopping in the sack just to produce a child and then go on their respective ways.

Besides, Colby Flynn had broken her heart. Oh, sure, she'd made a point of *not* letting him know that. She'd been determined to act sophisticated, to play off their breakup as no big deal, insisting they continue their friendship—which they had, albeit as slightly distant friends.

Sadly, she would never easily trust a man with her heart again.

Especially Colby Flynn.

She flipped through the pages of the knitting magazine. It was the fall edition and she couldn't work up much enthusiasm for trendy hat and sweater patterns when the temperature outside this week had barely made it below seventy degrees. In Becca's opinion, it was silly to send out the fall issue of a publication in the middle of June.

After a few more minutes, she set aside the magazine and turned out the light. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, the barely perceptible smell of animals from the area's horse and cattle ranches wafted in the gentle breeze, shifted the gauzy curtains at her window, and mingled with the lemon verbena scent of her linens. What would probably seem like an odd combination of

odors to others was actually comforting to Becca Sue. With every breath, she felt wrapped in a sense of the familiar, in generational roots that went as far back as the defenders of the Alamo.

What was Colby doing at his office so late at night? she wondered. Darla Pam Kirkwell, Hope Valley's self-appointed busybody, had mentioned that she'd heard he was leaving town, but then, Darla Pam loved to gossip and stir up trouble and her information was not always reliable.

Becca gave a start when she heard a noise coming from downstairs. A crash.

"Darn it, Trouble!" She threw back the bed sheet and got up. The silly cat was always getting into something he shouldn't. Trouble lived up to his name nicely—although Becca should have tacked on the middle name of Klepto. Over the past few months, her cat had actually been *stealing* things from the neighbors! Shiny hair clips from Donetta's salon, spoons from Anna's Café, trinkets from the hardware store and saddle shop...it was starting to get embarrassing.

The cat was either going to get arrested or Becca would have to take her to a shrink. Perhaps she ought to rethink the kitty doors she'd installed. Clearly the little menace needed less freedom.

"I swear, Trouble, if you've broken any of my prize collectibles, I'll take you to jail myself."

Without bothering to put on a robe, Becca opened the door at the top of the steep staircase that led to her shop below and flicked on the light switch. The single, low-wattage bulb didn't even have the courtesy to give a pop to let her know it was burned out. It simply didn't come on.

No problem. She knew the layout of the building by heart, right down to the last creaky board, and she always kept a flashlight behind the cash register in case of major storms or power outages.

Besides, she was all too aware that Colby was right across the street, and since she rarely pulled the shades over the front windows, she didn't particularly want to turn on the store lights. That would make Becca's Attic the equivalent of a lighted aquarium, and Becca the parading fish.

Her bare feet made only a whisper of sound on the wood treads. She counted thirteen steps, then reached for the crystal knob she knew was right in front of her on the door at the bottom of the stairs.

She expected the shrill of squeaky hinges.

She did *not* expect the blinding pain when something slammed into her side.

Or the next blow that buckled her knees.

* * *

Colby Flynn sealed another carton of law books and carried it to the growing stack piled neatly by the front door. He still had three weeks before he was scheduled to relocate to Dallas, but there was a lot of packing to do. He hadn't realized how much stuff he'd accumulated since he'd been back in Hope Valley.

He also hadn't realized how stupidly melancholy he'd feel about leaving his hometown and friends.

He touched the corkboard hanging on the wall by the front entrance. It was overflowing with lawyer jokes, some written on pieces of scrap paper, all of them held in place by colorful pushpins. Nearly everyone who crossed this threshold and saw the wall art ended up coming back and pinning their own joke to the board. Over the years, the collection had become vast.

This was his one and only concession to clutter.

Granted, he'd tried organizing the contents of the corkboard in the beginning, but it had been a losing battle. So he'd given in and let his friends have their fun—a difficult concession for a guy who'd attended military school and had organization burned into his brain.

Although some of the paper was yellowed with age, and the board looked like a scrap hoarder's mess, Colby hated to part with the thing.

But this wasn't the sort of art appropriate for the tastefully elegant walls of the Wells and Steadman law firm, soon to be Wells, Steadman and Flynn.

Leaving the corkboard where it was for the time being, he pushed the stack of packing boxes against the baseboard and turned to see what else needed doing. A flash of light caught his eye and he paused.

For a minute he thought his tired eyes were playing tricks on him. He could have sworn he saw a beam of light coming from Becca's shop, which had been dark for quite a while now. Her upstairs apartment lights had switched off almost an hour ago—yes, damn it, he reminded himself, he'd noticed.

Moving his law practice to the building across from Becca's Attic last year had been both heaven and torture. Heaven because he got to see Becca's cute little body sashaying in and out day after day.

And torture because he had to watch her cute little body sashaying in and out day after day—knowing he'd tossed away any chance of actually touching or holding her.

Although his regret was deep, he still believed that he'd done the right thing seven years ago by letting her go. She was a woman who deserved commitment, steadiness and roots.

Because of his family's track record, those were the things in life he feared most—along with failure.

The narrow beam glanced off the darkened window again. Why would Becca be prowling around with a flashlight at midnight? Why not just turn on the lights?

He didn't like the suspicions that came to mind. Curse of the profession—he'd been privy to way too many cases involving crimes where people stole from others because they were too damn lazy to go out and make their own money; or they were such slaves to drugs that their jobs weren't enough to fund their habit and they had to take what didn't belong to them.

Well, by God, nobody was going to steal from Becca Sue. Not if he had anything to say about it.

He removed a Colt .45 handgun from the file cabinet and stuffed it in the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back. Leaving his office, he sprinted across the street and slipped into the alley that led to the back entrance.

The door to her shop was ajar.

His heart lodged right up under his Adam's apple and his mouth went dry. He slid the Colt from his jeans and checked the safety.

Using his knuckles so he wouldn't sully any potentially incriminating fingerprints with his own, he eased the door open the rest of the way and crept inside, taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness.

Nothing moved. No sound.

He could hear his own breath loudly in his ears. A sixth sense told him he wasn't alone.

Simultaneously, he heard a moan and the sound of a car engine roaring to life. The moan was female and coming from inside. The pitch of the vehicle's muffler indicated it was accelerating away. Fast.

He slammed his hand against the wall, groping in the dark for the light switch. The side of his palm brushed the toggle and fluorescent lights blinked on, illuminating half the store.

Oh, man. Becca lay in a crumpled heap just beyond the stairwell doorway.