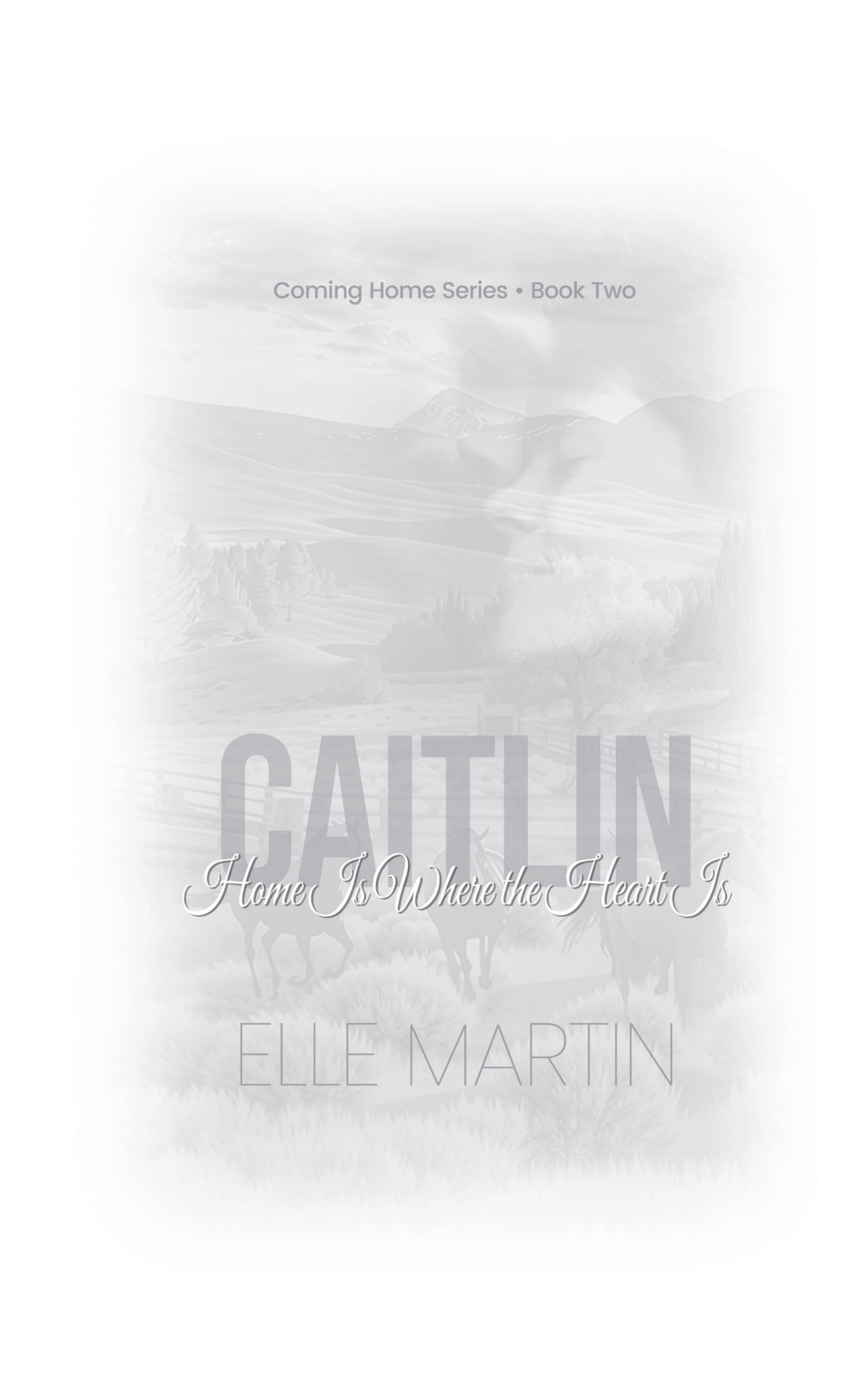




Coming Home Series • Book Two

CAITLIN

Home Is Where the Heart Is

ELLE MARTIN

Copyright © 2026 Elle Martin Books. All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 or under the terms of any license permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

Published by:

Elle Martin Books; ellemartinbooks.com

Typesetting & Cover Design:

M2 Creative

Editor:

Stay Weird Creative Services, LLC

Printed in The United States of America

Contents

Dedication.	5
Foreword	6
Character List.	8
A note on content.	13
Prologue.	15
Chapter 1.	41
Chapter 2.	55
Chapter 3.	68
Chapter 4.	83
Chapter 5.	103
Chapter 6.	120
Chapter 7.	135
Chapter 8.	157
Chapter 9.	174
Chapter 10.	193
Chapter 11.	205
Chapter 12.	217
Chapter 13.	232
Chapter 14.	247
Chapter 15.	265
Chapter 16.	279
Chapter 17.	294

Chapter 18.	.314
Chapter 19.	.331
Chapter 20.	.351
Chapter 21.	.381
Chapter 22.	.403
Chapter 23.	.418
Chapter 24.	.427
Chapter 25.	.435
Epilogue.	.443
Sneak Peek of Book Three	.461
Acknowledgements.	.470
About the Author.	.472
Books by the Author	.473

A note on content

This is a love story, but it does not look away from the harder corners of love. Readers should know that the pages ahead include depictions of early pregnancy loss, on-page grief, and threats of violence connected to organized crime, including scenes of peril, captivity, and confrontation. The novel includes scenes of emotional and physical intimacy between consenting adults, written sensually but not graphically. None of these elements are included for shock. Each one belongs to Caitlin and Cameron's journey—to the cost of what they lost, and the courage of what they chose to build. If any of this is tender ground for you, please read with care.

*Some choices we make in youth echo through every
year that follows, shaping the people we become
and the regrets we carry.*

∞ ∞ ∞

Prologue

Fifteen Years Ago

Caitlin Ellery had always wondered what it felt like to break your own heart. Now she knew—it felt like forcing words past a throat that wanted to scream the opposite, like watching the man you love go still and pale while you deliver lies dressed up as choices.

“I’m leaving. Tomorrow.”

Cameron Alexander went very still, the warmth draining from his eyes as he searched her face for some explanation that would make this make sense. Twenty-four hours ago, they’d lain tangled together in the high meadow, planning a future as certain as the Wyoming

stars scattered above them. Now she stood in his cabin doorway, arms wrapped around herself as if she could physically hold together the heart she was about to break.

"But we talked about this." His voice was rough, bewildered. "You said you wanted to come back here after law school. You said we were going to build something together."

"I know what I said." The lies burned her throat, but she forced them out because the alternative—telling him about her father's ultimatum, about the impossible choice she had been given—would only make this harder. Would make him fight. And if Cameron fought, her father would destroy him.

"I got an internship in Denver. It's an incredible opportunity. I'd be stupid not to take it."

"What about us?"

Three words. Three simple words that carried the power of every promise they'd made under starlight, every dream they'd sketched out with the confidence of two people who believed love could conquer anything.

Caitlin lifted her chin, channeling the courtroom composure she had been training for since Harvard.

"Us was a summer romance, Cam. It was

beautiful. Intense. But it was never supposed to be forever.”

“You’re lying.” He moved closer, and she could see it in his face—the way he read her fear, her conflict, her desperation—because Cameron had always seen through her. From that first conversation three months ago, when she had stopped noticing him as just another ranch hand and started seeing the intelligence, the integrity, the quiet strength that had become essential to her.

“This isn’t about opportunity. This is about fear.”

He was right. God help her, he was exactly right.

But she couldn’t tell him the truth. Couldn’t explain that staying would cost him everything—his job, his future, his place on the only land he had ever called home. Her father had made certain of that.

So instead, she destroyed everything.



The night before had been perfect—so perfect that remembering it now felt like pressing on a fresh wound.

They’d escaped to the high meadow after sunset, spreading a blanket on the sweet-

scented grass where the Wyoming sky stretched infinitely above them. Caitlin had rested her head on Cameron's chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat while she explained the water rights case she had been studying—*Winters v. United States*—and he had listened the way he always did. Not just waiting for his turn to speak, but genuinely absorbing every word, asking questions that proved he understood not just the legal precedent but why it mattered to her.

"You're going to change the world," he had said with certainty, brushing a kiss across her forehead. "Some corporate law firm in New York is going to hire you, and you're going to revolutionize everything they think they know about justice."

"Or maybe I'll come back here." She had pulled him closer, surprising herself with how much she meant it. "Practice small-town law. Water rights and land disputes. Fight for communities that corporate attorneys overlook."

The hope that had flickered across his face—hope he had tried so hard to hide—had undone her completely.

"I have something to tell you," Cameron had said afterward, when they lay tangled together with the stars as witness. "Your father offered me the ranch foreman position. Permanent.

With a house and everything.”

“That’s your dream job.”

“I turned it down.” His voice held the importance of a sacrifice she hadn’t asked him to make. “I didn’t want you to think I was trying to tie you to this place. I wanted you to choose me freely—not because I made it complicated for you to leave.”

The gesture was so perfectly Cameron—selfless and thoughtful and deeply romantic—that she had said the words before she could stop them.

“I love you. I love your integrity and your kindness and the way you see possibilities where other people see limitations. I love the future I can imagine with you.”

They’d talked until dawn about that future. He would accept the foreman position after all. She would finish law school but return to Wyoming. They would build a house on the land her father had promised, raise children who understood the value of both education and roots.

It had been a perfect plan. A beautiful plan.

A plan that shattered the moment her father called her into his office.



Ronan Ellery stood behind his desk like a general surveying a battlefield, the afternoon light casting harsh shadows across features that had never learned to soften. Behind him, the window framed the Ellery legacy he had inherited and expanded—thousands of acres of Wyoming land that answered to his authority the same way everyone in his orbit eventually did.

Everyone except Caitlin. Until today.

“Sit down.”

“I’ll stand.” She had learned long ago that accepting his hospitality meant accepting his terms. “What’s this about? I have plans this evening.”

“With Cameron Alexander, I assume.” Her father’s voice could have frozen the August heat. “That’s what I want to discuss.”

“There’s nothing to discuss. I love him. He loves me. When I finish law school, I’m coming back here to build a life with him.”

Ronan’s laugh was short and humorless. “You’re twenty-three years old. You don’t know what love is.”

“I know exactly what love is. It’s finding someone who sees you clearly and chooses you

anyway. It's building something together that neither of you could build alone." She met his gaze without flinching. "It's everything you and Mom never had."

The words landed like a slap. Good. Let him feel something for once.

"You're throwing away your future for a ranch hand." Ronan's composure cracked, revealing the cold fury beneath. "Harvard Law. Top of your class. Every door in the legal world ready to open for you. And you want to waste it playing house in Wyoming?"

"I want to use my education to help communities like this one. Rural families who can't afford Denver attorneys. Ranchers fighting corporate land grabs. That's not wasting anything—that's exactly what the law should be for."

"Romantic nonsense." He waved a dismissive hand. "You'll take the internship in Denver. You'll finish your education with practical experience that leads to real opportunities. And you'll forget about this summer fantasy before it derails everything we've built for you."

"We?" Caitlin stepped closer to his desk, anger rising to match his. "You mean everything you've built. Everything you decided I should want. I'm done letting you dictate my choices."

“Then you’ll make those choices without my financial support.”

The threat hung in the air between them. Her scholarship covered tuition, but living expenses in New York ran nearly ninety thousand a year. Without her father’s help, finishing law school would mean crushing debt—the kind that would dictate her career path for decades.

But she had expected this. Had lain awake last night preparing for exactly this moment.

“Fine.” The word came out steady, certain. “I’ll take out loans. Work part-time. Figure it out the way thousands of other students do. I don’t need your money, Dad. I never needed your money. What I needed was a father who supported my choices instead of trying to control them.”

Something shifted in Ronan’s expression—surprise, maybe, that she had called his bluff. Then his eyes narrowed with the calculating look she had seen him turn on business rivals before he destroyed them.

“You think this is about money?” He laughed again, but there was no humor in it. “Caitlin, I’m trying to protect you from yourself. You’re infatuated with a man who has nothing to offer you. No education. No prospects. No future beyond fixing fences and herding cattle.”

"He has more integrity in his smallest gesture than you've shown in your entire life. He turned down your foreman position because he didn't want me to feel obligated to stay. That's the kind of man he is."

"Yes." Ronan's smile turned sharp. "He did turn it down. Foolish choice, really. That position is the only thing standing between Cameron Alexander and a lifetime of seasonal work and borrowed bunkhouses."

Ice crept down Caitlin's spine. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that ranch hands are easy to replace. Especially ones who've developed... inappropriate attachments to the owner's daughter." He straightened the papers on his desk with deliberate precision. "I've already spoken with every major ranch operation in three counties. The Crossed T, the Bar Seven, the Hawthorn spread. Old friends, all of them. They understand the importance of maintaining proper boundaries between workers and the families that employ them."

"You're threatening to blackball him." The words came out hollow. "Because he fell in love with me."

"I'm explaining consequences." Ronan's voice was almost gentle now—the tenderness of a man who knew he had already won. "Cameron

Alexander stays in Wyoming, he works for this family or he doesn't work at all. Every rancher in the region knows that crossing me means losing access to my water rights, my grazing agreements, my equipment co-ops. No one will hire him. No one will rent to him. He'll have to leave the state to find work, and even then..." He shrugged. "I have friends in Montana too."

"You can't do this." But even as she said it, Caitlin knew he could. Her father had spent forty years building a network of obligations and alliances across the Rocky Mountain West. When Ronan Ellery wanted someone gone, they disappeared.

"I can. And I will." He leaned forward, hands flat on his desk. "Unless you take the internship in Denver and end this foolishness cleanly. No dramatic scenes, no tearful good-byes, no promises to wait. You tell Cameron Alexander that what you had was a summer romance—beautiful, but not meant to last. No contact and no rekindling the relationship when you think enough time has passed that I might weaken on my stance. Because trust me, little girl, I won't. And I will have no problem making good on my promise tomorrow or five years from now."

"And if I do that?" Her voice cracked on the question. "If I leave?"

"Then Cameron keeps his job. I'll even give

him the foreman position he turned down—he's talented, I'll grant you that. He stays on this land, builds the life he's always wanted, finds a woman who won't drag him into situations beyond his station." Ronan's expression softened into something that might have been genuine concern. "You love him, Caitlin? Then protect him. Walk away before your feelings destroy everything he's worked for."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair. It's choices and consequences. You can have your pride and watch Cameron lose everything, or you can do what's best for both of you and let him go." He sat back, victory already settling into his posture. "You have until tomorrow morning to decide."

She stood frozen in his office, her mind racing through alternatives that collapsed as quickly as they formed. Take Cameron with her? To what—a studio apartment in Denver while she worked sixty-hour weeks and he searched for jobs that didn't exist for displaced ranch hands? Tell him the truth and let him fight? Her father would crush him without hesitation, and Cameron's stubbornness would only make it worse.

Her father had found the one weakness she couldn't defend against. Not her own future—she would have sacrificed that gladly. But

Cameron's?

She thought of him turning down the foreman position so she could choose freely. Thought of his dreams for this land, his connection to the horses, his quiet plans for a life rooted in honest work and natural beauty. Her father was offering to give Cameron everything he had ever wanted—but only if she wasn't part of the picture.

If you really love him, you'll let him find someone who can give him a future he deserves.

The words were manipulation, she knew that. But they also contained just enough truth to cut through every defense she had.

"I'll do it." The words tasted like ash. "I'll leave. But I want your word—your actual word, not your business handshake—that Cameron gets the foreman position. That you'll never tell him why I left. That you'll let him build his life here without your interference."

"You have it." Her father nodded once, satisfied. "I'm glad you're being sensible about this. Someday you'll thank me."

"I will never thank you." She turned toward the door, then stopped. "And Dad? I'm going to become exactly the attorney you wanted. I'm going to be brilliant and successful and everything you dreamed of. But I'm going to

do it knowing that you took the only thing that ever really mattered to me. I'm going to carry that knowledge every single day. And when you're old and alone and wondering why none of your children visit, I want you to remember this moment. Remember that you won, and look around at everything it cost you."

She walked out before he could respond, before her composure shattered, before she said something that would make things worse for Cameron.

She had twenty-four hours to destroy the man she loved—to break his heart so thoroughly that he had never come after her, never fight for them, never give her father a reason to follow through on his threats.

Twenty-four hours to become exactly the person Cameron Alexander didn't deserve.

Now, standing in Cameron's doorway with her heart in pieces, Caitlin watched something die in the eyes of the only man she had ever truly loved.

"If you walk out that door," he said, his voice rough with pain, "if you leave without giving us a real chance, don't come back expecting to pick up where we left off. I won't be your consolation prize when the big city chews you up and spits you out."

The words were designed to hurt, and they succeeded. But beneath the anger, she could hear the heartbreak of someone who had believed in their future and was watching it crumble without understanding why.

Good, she thought, even as her heart shattered. Be angry. Hate me. It's the only way you'll let me go.

"I understand," she whispered, then fled before her courage failed entirely.

She left before dawn the next morning, driving away without looking back. Because she knew that seeing Cameron's face in her rearview mirror would make her turn around, regardless of the consequences.

She told herself she was making the right choice. The selfless choice. The choice that would let Cameron build the life he deserved, even if she couldn't be part of it.

Ten weeks later, staring at two pink lines on a pregnancy test, she realized the universe had one final cruelty in store.

She was carrying Cameron's baby.

Ten weeks. She had been pregnant for ten weeks and had not known.

Looking back, the signs had been there all along. The nausea she had blamed on stress. The exhaustion she had attributed to eighteen-hour

workdays. The way her emotions swung wildly between grief and rage and a hollow numbness she could not name. She had been so focused on burying her feelings about Cameron, about Wyoming, about everything she had sacrificed, that she had missed what her body had been trying to tell her for over two months.

It was a Thursday evening when she finally acknowledged that something was wrong. Standing in her tiny Denver kitchen, she had done the math for the first time, counting back to her last period, and felt the floor tilt beneath her feet.

She bought the test at a pharmacy three blocks from her apartment, paying cash like a criminal covering her tracks. The walk home felt endless, the small box in her purse weighted with possibilities she could not afford to consider.

Two minutes. That is what the instructions said. Two minutes to change everything.

She set the test on the bathroom counter and could not watch. Instead, she stared at her reflection in the mirror: the shadows under her eyes, the hollows in her cheeks, a woman who had convinced herself she was building something meaningful while everything that actually mattered crumbled to dust.

When she finally looked down, two pink

lines stared back at her with the power of fate.

Pregnant.

Pregnant with Cameron's baby.

The sob that tore from her throat was equal parts devastation and desperate, impossible hope. It had been weeks. The baby already had fingers and toes. A heartbeat. She had been carrying this child, their child, through every miserable day of her internship, through every sleepless night when she had stared at her ceiling and wondered if she had made the worst mistake of her life.

And suddenly, in the space between one heartbeat and the next, she could see it: a different ending to their story. She would call Cameron. Tell him everything. Confess her father's ultimatum and the impossible choice and the lies she had told to protect him. He would be angry, yes. Hurt. But Cameron had never been a man who let anger override love, and when he learned about the baby...

He would come. She knew it with a certainty that bypassed logic entirely. Cameron would drive through the night to reach her, because that is who he was. They would figure out law school together, find a way to make it work, because love could conquer real obstacles when two people refused to give up on each other. And her father's threats? They would face them

together. Find work in another state if they had to. Build their own life far from Ronan Ellery's reach.

This baby was a second chance she had not dared to pray for.

She sank onto the cold tile floor, one hand pressed against her abdomen where a small life had been growing without her knowledge, and let herself imagine. A child with Cameron's steady nature and her fierce determination. A little boy with his father's kind eyes, or a little girl with the stubborn chin they had both inherited from ancestors who refused to quit. They would raise this baby somewhere far from her father's control, surrounded by love and hope and a determination to build something real.

For seventy-two hours, Caitlin lived inside that fantasy.

She spent Friday in a daze, going through the motions at work while her mind spun elaborate futures. She would need to find an obstetrician. Tell her supervisor she would be taking leave. Figure out how to finish law school with a baby, because she would finish, even if it took longer than planned. Her father's money be damned. She would find another way.

She drafted the speech to Cameron a hundred times in her head. Rehearsed it in the shower

that night, whispered it to herself on Saturday morning while she made tea she could barely keep down.

I was wrong, she would tell him. I was scared, and I let my father threaten me into giving you up. But I am not scared anymore. I am terrified—of being a mother, of disappointing you again, of trying to build a life that does not fit anyone's plan but ours. But I am more terrified of spending another day pretending I do not love you. And now there is someone else to consider. Someone who deserves to know their father.

She picked up her phone a dozen times on Saturday. Put it down a dozen more. Told herself she was waiting for the right moment, when the truth was she was savoring the last few hours when hope was still untested, before she made the call and discovered whether Cameron Alexander could forgive the unforgivable.

She decided she would call him Sunday morning. Give him time to absorb the news before the work week started. They could talk for hours if they needed to, without the pressure of obligations pulling them away.

She never got the chance.

The cramping started Saturday night.

At first, she told herself it was nothing.

Growing pains, maybe. Her body adjusting to the pregnancy it had been hiding for weeks. She took two Tylenol, pressed a heating pad against her lower back, and tried to sleep.

By two in the morning, she knew something was wrong.

The pain had teeth now, wave after wave of cramping that made her double over, made her gasp for breath, made her wonder if this was what labor felt like and then immediately wish she had not thought that, because this was not labor. This was something else. Something her body understood even as her mind refused to accept it.

When she went to the bathroom, there was blood. Not spotting. Not the light pink discharge the pregnancy websites had warned might be normal. This was bright red and heavy, soaking through her underwear, and the sight of it tore a sound from her throat that didn't sound human.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

She sat on the toilet, shaking, watching her second chance drain away. The cramps were relentless now, building to peaks that left her breathless, then ebbing just enough for her to think maybe, maybe it would stop, before the next wave hit even harder than the last.

And then she saw the clots.

Dark and substantial, nothing like the normal bleeding she had ever experienced. Her hands shook as she gripped the lip the sink, trying to breathe through the horror of what was happening, trying to convince herself that this might still be okay, that women bled during pregnancy all the time, that she should just wait until morning and call a doctor.

But her body kept telling her the truth she didn't want to hear. The cramping intensified until she was crying out with each wave, until she was genuinely afraid of what was happening inside her, until she finally admitted she needed help.

She called 911 when she could no longer manage alone, barely able to give her address through the sobs.

The emergency room at Denver General was fluorescent-bright and brutally efficient.

They asked her questions she could barely process. How far along? Ten weeks. When did the bleeding start? A few hours ago. Is there anyone we can call? She shook her head, unable to explain that the only person she wanted was someone she had thrown away, someone who didn't even know this baby existed.

They gave her a hospital gown and a bed in

a curtained bay. Hooked her up to monitors that beeped with indifferent rhythm. A nurse with kind eyes held her hand during the ultrasound, and Caitlin knew from the silence, from the careful way the technician studied the screen without saying anything, that there was nothing left to save.

"I am so sorry," the doctor said when she came in. Young, maybe only a few years older than Caitlin, with the careful compassion of someone who delivered this news more often than anyone should have to. "There is no heartbeat. Your body is in the process of passing the pregnancy naturally, which is why you are experiencing such intense symptoms."

Passing the pregnancy. Such clinical language for the death of everything she had let herself hope for.

They explained what would happen next. The bleeding would continue for a while. The cramping would ease. They could do a procedure to speed things along, or she could let her body complete the process at home. They used words like "tissue" and "products of conception" and "follow-up appointment," and Caitlin nodded at all of it while something inside her turned to stone.

She chose to go home. She didn't want to be in this place, with its harsh lights and antiseptic

smells and strangers who meant well but could not possibly understand what she had lost. Not just a pregnancy. Not just a baby. The bridge back to everything she had destroyed.

They gave her pamphlets about grief counseling and warning signs of complications and a prescription for pain medication that she would never fill because the physical pain was the only thing that felt real anymore. A nurse helped her into a wheelchair, then into a cab, because she had arrived in an ambulance and had no one to drive her home.

The sun was rising over Denver when she walked back into her empty apartment. Pink and gold light streamed through windows she had not bothered to curtain, illuminating a space that felt like it belonged to someone else. Someone who still had hope.

She made it as far as the couch before her legs gave out.

The worst of it was over by Sunday evening, but the bleeding continued for days afterward, a constant reminder of what she had lost.

She called in sick on Monday. Tuesday. By Wednesday, her supervisor left a voicemail expressing concern, and Caitlin forced herself to shower, to dress, to go through the motions of being a functioning person. She told them she had a stomach virus. Food poisoning, maybe.

Nothing to worry about.

No one questioned it. No one looked at her closely enough to see that something fundamental had broken behind her eyes.

She had the baby for exactly seventy-two hours. Seventy-two hours of imagining a future, of building hope from the wreckage of her choices, of believing that maybe, maybe, the universe had offered her a path back to everything she had thrown away.

Now there was nothing. No baby. No second chance. No reason to call Cameron with confessions and apologies and desperate pleas for forgiveness.

The cruel arithmetic of it nearly destroyed her. She had given up the love of her life to protect him, and now she had lost the child who might have given her the courage to fight for them anyway. The universe had not just closed a door. It had burned the entire house down and salted the earth where it stood.

Late at night, in the darkness of her apartment, she finally let herself shatter.

The sobs came from somewhere deeper than grief, from the place where she had buried every dream she had sacrificed, every compromise she had made, every lie she had told herself about duty and ambition and what

it meant to build a meaningful life. She cried for the baby she had carried without knowing. For Cameron, who would never learn how close she had come to calling him. For the girl who had lain in a Wyoming meadow believing love could conquer anything, who had no idea how thoroughly her father was about to force her hand.

She cried until there was nothing left. And then, because she was Ronan Ellery's daughter and falling apart was not an option, she wiped her face, took another shower, and began the slow, methodical process of becoming someone who could survive this.

She would not call Cameron. What would be the point? To burden him with a loss he had never known to grieve? To confess feelings that no longer came attached to hope? He deserved to move on, to find someone who wouldn't bring her father's wrath down on his head, to build the life he had dreamed of with a woman whose love didn't come with impossible conditions.

She would not go home to Wyoming. Not for holidays, not for family gatherings, not for any reason that might put her in proximity to the man whose heart she had broken or the father who had forced her hand.

She would become exactly what her father wanted. The brilliant attorney. The impressive

career. The success story that looked good in Christmas letters and alumni magazines and all the superficial metrics people used to measure whether a life meant something.

If she could not have love, she would have achievement. If she could not have Cameron, she would have corner offices and court victories and the cold comfort of being very, very good at something that didn't matter nearly as much as she pretended.

It was the only way she knew to survive.

She never told anyone about the baby.

Not her mother, who would have grieved with her. Not her sister, who might have understood. Not the therapist she saw twice before deciding that excavating her feelings was more dangerous than burying them. The follow-up appointment at the hospital became a line item in her medical records, filed away where no one would ever think to look.

The loss became a locked room inside her chest: a place she never visited, never acknowledged, never allowed herself to mourn properly because proper mourning would have required admitting what she had almost had and why she had lost it. She packed away the maternity clothes she had not yet bought, the nursery she had not yet imagined, the future she had not yet lived. She filed it all under

“things that never happened” and built walls so thick that some days she almost believed them.

Almost.

Some secrets, she learned, didn’t get easier to carry with time.

They just got heavier.

Some losses stay buried until joy unearths them — until watching someone else's happiness becomes a mirror reflecting everything you never allowed yourself to have.



Chapter 1

When Silence Breaks

Seven months ago...

The Denver skyline glitters beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, a sprawl of light against the darkening sky. Caitlin's corner office on the thirty-seventh floor catches the last bruised colors of sunset, casting long shadows across the mahogany desk where depositions lie spread like a battlefield map.

The building has gone quiet. Associates have fled to happy hours and dinner reservations, partners to charity galas and country club obligations. The cleaning crew won't arrive for another hour. This is her favorite time—the

hush that settles over the Hartwell Building after hours, when the constant hum of ambition and political maneuvering finally goes silent and she can simply work.

No performative conversations in the break room. No calculating which relationships need tending. No exhausting chess game of partnership track politics.

Just her, the case, and the satisfaction of finding the cracks in opposing counsel's arguments.

She circles a contradiction in the plaintiff's testimony, red ink bleeding across the page like a wound. Three more inconsistencies and she'll have enough to—

Light flares in her peripheral vision. Her phone, face-up on the desk, screen glowing with an incoming call.

She ignores it. Whoever it is can leave a message. The thread she's pulling will unravel completely if she loses focus now, and she's so close to—

The screen goes dark.

Then immediately lights up again.

Caitlin huffs a sharp breath of annoyance, the kind she had never let a colleague witness, and reaches for the phone with every intention of silencing it.

The name on the screen stops her cold.

Keagan.

Her brother never calls. None of them do anymore—the Ellery siblings scattered like seeds in a Wyoming windstorm years ago, and the silence between them has calcified into something that feels permanent. Holiday cards with printed signatures. Occasional e-mails about nothing important. The careful distance of people who share blood but little else.

Keagan doesn't call. Not since their father's ultimatum drove him to Manhattan. Not since she fled to Denver with her own wounds still bleeding. Not in all the time spent pretending that distance equals healing.

Her thumb hovers over the screen. The Denver skyline blurs beyond the windows, all those glittering lights suddenly feeling very far away.

She answers with the crisp professionalism that has become her armor. "Caitlin Ellery speaking."

"Caitlin, it's Keagan."

Something is wrong. She can hear it in the timbre of his voice—a heaviness that doesn't belong to the brother who conquered Manhattan's cutthroat real estate world, who built skyscrapers and made millions and proved

their father wrong about everything.

“Keagan? This is... unexpected.” She sets down the red pen, depositions forgotten. “What’s wrong?”

The pause stretches long enough for her heart to begin hammering against her ribs.

“Dad’s gone, Cait. Heart attack. Three days ago.”

The words don’t make sense. Their father—Ronan Ellery, permanent as the Rocky Mountains, immovable as the Wyoming bedrock beneath the Double E Ranch—can’t simply be gone. The man who dominated every room, who built an empire through sheer force of will, whose voice still echoes in her nightmares of inadequacy—men like that don’t just die.

But they do. They always do.

Outside her window, the Denver skyline continues its indifferent glitter. Cars stream along I-25, red taillights bleeding into the darkness. Somewhere out there, people are laughing, arguing, falling in love, living ordinary evenings untouched by the words still reverberating through her phone.

Dad’s gone.

“I see.” She forces her voice steady, falling back on the courtroom composure she’s spent years perfecting. The slight tremor she can’t

quite suppress is the only crack in her armor. "When's the funeral?"

"Two weeks from Saturday. Memorial service, then a reception at the ranch. We'll scatter his ashes at Eagle Canyon." He pauses. "You remember the spot."

"I remember." The words catch in her throat. She remembers racing her horse up that ridge at sixteen, long dark hair streaming behind her, whooping with the wild joy of a girl who still believed she could earn her father's approval. Before law school. Before Denver. Before Cameron.

Before everything fell apart.

"I'll be there," she says, and ends the call before her voice can betray her.

The depositions blur on her desk. Red ink bleeds across testimony that no longer matters, and Caitlin Ellery—who hasn't cried in fifteen years, who has built her entire identity on control and competence and never letting them see her break—presses her palm against her mouth and shatters.

The Denver skyline offers no comfort. Just glass and steel and distance, glittering on while her carefully constructed world crumbles to dust.



Two weeks later...

The ranch house appears through her windshield exactly as she remembers—imposing and welcoming, solid and eternal. Caitlin parks the rental sedan and sits for a long moment, hands still gripping the wheel.

Her designer suit feels like armor, hair pulled back in a chignon that hasn't moved despite hours of travel. Every inch the successful attorney. Every inch the woman who left this place and never looked back.

The front door opens, and her mother steps onto the porch.

Meagan Ellery has aged in ways that make Caitlin's chest ache. The woman who always seemed timeless and strong now moves with a fragility that speaks of loss too fresh to process. She's wearing one of their father's old flannel shirts, drowning in fabric that must still hold his scent.

"My baby girl." Her mother's embrace is fierce and brief—the hug of a woman holding herself together through sheer force of will. "I'm so glad you came."

Of course I came. But even as she thinks it, Caitlin knows it isn't that simple. She's stayed

away, finding excuses not to visit, reasons not to call, justifications for the distance that grew into a chasm. Coming home for her father's funeral feels less like duty and more like surrender.

The memorial service was simple and dignified. Community members painting pictures filled with stories of a man none of his children fully recognized.

One neighbor shared Ronan's quiet help during a particularly harsh winter. A teacher described his patience during the school tours he led every spring—fourth graders learning about ranching and sustainable agriculture from a man who supposedly had no patience for such things. This community that depended on him spoke of a person his children never witnessed.

And then they scatter his ashes at Eagle Canyon. Each watching as the Wyoming wind carried him across the land he loved more than he ever knew how to love them.

And then there was Cameron, standing at the periphery of the gathering, hat in his weathered hands. Caitlin felt his presence like a constant current running beneath every moment of the visit—glimpses of him across the yard, the sound of his truck pulling in before dawn, evidence of his work everywhere she looked.

He avoided her as deliberately as she had

been avoiding him.

Some wounds, it seems, don't heal with time.
They just learn to hide.



New Year's Eve...

Caitlin watched as her brother spun his bride across the dance floor, both of them laughing with the kind of unguarded joy she had forgotten people were capable of feeling.

A New Year's Eve wedding. Trust Keagan to choose the most symbolic date possible—new beginnings layered on new beginnings, the promise of fresh starts as the old year dies and a new one draws its first breath. The reception transformed the ranch house into something out of a fairy tale—string lights glowing against the winter night, candles flickering on every surface, the warmth of family and community pressing back against the Wyoming cold.

After everything this family has survived in the past seven months, the celebration felt almost miraculous.

And they'd survived so much.

Through it all, Caitlin had found reasons to return. The family needed her skills—her legal expertise—she told herself. It had nothing to do with the ranch itself, or the brother she was

learning to know again, or the way Wyoming air still smelled like home.

Nothing to do with Cameron at all.

Now, watching Keagan press his forehead to Shani's, watching Niall and Kirsten race between tables in their miniature wedding finery, Caitlin felt something she couldn't quite name. Pride, maybe. Hope. The fragile belief that maybe this family had finally begun to heal.

It wouldn't happen overnight. The wounds were still too fresh—the discovery that their father had loved them all along but couldn't find the words, the years of distance that couldn't be erased by a single crisis or a single celebration. But they're trying. All of them, in their own clumsy ways, were trying.

Briar with his camera, capturing joy instead of hiding behind the lens. Rory, deep in conversation with local ranchers about regenerative agriculture, finally finding an audience that didn't dismiss his passion. Croía, who had designed the wedding decorations herself, her artist's eye transforming the space into something magical. Even their mother had emerged from the fog of grief enough to laugh—really laugh—at something Cameron said.

Cameron.

Caitlin's eyes found him before she could stop herself, standing near the barn, talking with one of the ranch hands. He looked exactly like what he is—the man who held the Double E together through crisis after crisis, who had become as essential to this place as the land itself.

Forty years old now, silver threading through his dark hair, weathered by sun and work in ways that only made him more devastatingly handsome. She looked away before he could catch her staring.

The boy she loved when she was twenty-three was now the man she didn't know how to stop loving at thirty-eight.

On the dance floor, Keagan lifted Kirsten onto his feet, causing Caitlin to smile as he waltzed with the four-year-old in clumsy circles while she giggled with delight. Niall tugs at Shani's dress, demanded his turn, and soon both twins were being danced around the floor by the man who had become their father in every way that matters.

Their father.

The thought lands like a blow to her chest.

Keagan, who spent twenty years running from this place, had found his way home. Built a family from the wreckage of loss and grief,

and became an instant father to two children who needed exactly what he had to give.

And watching him—watching the easy way he scooped Niall onto his hip, the tender way he would smooth Kirsten's hair, the absolute certainty with which he stepped into this role—something cracked open inside Caitlin that she spent so much time and energy sealing shut.

Their father.

She could have had this. Should have had this. Would have had this, if she hadn't—

The thought cut off before she completed it, but the damage was done. Memories she's buried so deep they might as well be entombed came flooding back with vicious clarity.

She couldn't breathe.

The reception pressed in around her—too many people, too much joy, too much reminder of everything she lost and everything she never told him. Her fingers went to the space between thumb and forefinger, pressing over the tiny white-ink tattoo—almost invisible against her skin, but sharp as a confession in her mind.

A tiny heart with delicate wings. So small and so perfectly matched to her skin tone that it's invisible unless you know exactly where to look.

She needed air. She needed silence. The

need to be anywhere but here, watching her brother live the life she threw away while the old year counts down its final hours was almost overpowering.



The bite of January air stings Caitlin's cheeks as she steps into the night, her breath forming small clouds that dissipate into the star-pricked darkness. Behind her, the ranch house spills warmth and golden light across the snow-covered yard. Windows glow like beacons, the sounds of celebration carrying through the walls—laughter and music and the distant countdown that means midnight is approaching, that the new year will arrive whether she's ready for it or not.

The wedding reception turned into a full New Year's Eve party, with guests lingering to ring in the new year alongside the newlyweds. Inside, champagne is being poured, toasts are being made, and everyone is wrapped up in the promise of fresh starts and happy endings.

Everyone except her.

Her wool coat pulled tight against the Wyoming wind, the weight of it settling around her shoulders like armor. Her leather boots crunch against the packed snow as she makes her way down the worn path toward the barn,

each step deliberate and measured. The cold air filling her lungs with a sharpness that feels cleansing after the overwhelming warmth of too many people, too many memories, too many feelings she doesn't know how to carry.

The barn looms ahead, its weathered wood silvered by moonlight. As a child, this was her solace when the house became too much—when her father's voice grew too sharp, when the expectations felt too heavy, when she needed the particular kind of silence that only came from being surrounded by creatures who asked nothing of her but presence.

Tonight was no different.

The heavy door groaning on its hinges, she slips inside and is immediately enveloped by the familiar cocktail of scents that memory has preserved with perfect clarity: sweet hay, worn leather, the earthy musk of horses, and something indefinable that simply means home in a way her Denver penthouse never has. The barn's interior is bathed in the soft amber glow of the overhead lights Cameron always leaves burning for the late evening check.

Her chest tightens at the thought of his name.

In the far corner, the golden retriever lifts her head from where she lies curled protectively around her new litter, tail giving a gentle thump of recognition before settling back down. The

puppies, barely two weeks old, are nothing more than squirming bundles of fur, their tiny squeaks and sighs creating the kind of innocent soundtrack that makes the world feel safer somehow.

Caitlin kneels beside the whelping box, her knees sinking into the clean straw Cameron has spread there. One tiny pup detaches from his mother's warmth and tumbles toward her hand, nothing but trust and instinct guiding his clumsy movements. The sight of such complete vulnerability and such absolute faith that the world will provide what he needs makes her throat constrict with emotions she's spent years learning to suppress.

"Seems like you're still running away when things get complicated."