



Miracle Road: An Eternity Springs Novel

By Emily March

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Perfect for fans of Robyn Carr and Debbie Macomber, *New York Times* bestselling author Emily March's seventh book in the Eternity Springs series is a heartwarming story that celebrates the miracle and joy of love during the holidays.

After tragedy strikes his team, college basketball coach Lucca Romano arrives in the haven of Eternity Springs to reassess his life. Even a winning record and big offers can't dent the wall of guilt that Lucca has built around himself. *Nothing* can—except maybe a vibrant new neighbor who won't give up on him.

Schoolteacher Hope Montgomery believes in miracles. She *has* to believe—because giving up would mean crumbling under the greatest loss a parent can endure. Hope understands Lucca's suffering; she lives it herself every day. However, the high school team needs his coaching expertise, so she sets out to draw him from his cold, solitary shell and into the warmth of life in their small Rocky Mountain town. But when a weak moment leads to consequences that shake Hope's faith, it's up to Lucca to put aside his heartache and show the teacher that here in Eternity Springs broken hearts can heal—just in time for Christmas.

Praise for Emily March and *Miracle Road*

“With passion, romance, and revealing moments that will touch your heart, [Emily March] takes readers on an unhurried journey where past mistakes are redeemed and a more beautiful future is forged—one miracle at a time.”—***USA Today***

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“A book I loved to read and would recommend to anyone who likes a wonderful holiday story. Another great story by a great author.”—***Romance Junkies***

“Really good . . . It had all the charm a small town and its inhabitants can bring

to life. . . . The other characters in the small town of Eternity Springs bring a warmth and humor that make this book so appealing.”—*Night Owl Reviews*

“For the reader who has plenty of stress in real life and needs to go to a lovely fantasy place of peace . . . where goodness can triumph and love can prevail. It’s a real good place to visit.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“There is a sigh-worthy conclusion . . . but there is also the recognition that even for the strong, survival requires courage and love. There’s nothing twee about that reminder—as those who have survived tragedy can attest.”—*Heroes and Heartbreakers*

“For a wonderful read, don’t miss a visit to Eternity Springs.”—**Lisa Kleypas**

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Miracle Road: An Eternity Springs Novel By Emily March Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #427665 in Books
- Published on: 2013-11-05
- Released on: 2013-11-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.86" h x .95" w x 4.15" l, .39 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author **Emily March** lives in Texas with her husband and their beloved boxer, Doc, who tolerates a revolving doggie door of rescue foster dogs sharing his kingdom until they find their forever homes. A graduate of Texas A&M University, Emily March is an avid fan of Aggie sports, and her recipe for jalapeño relish has made her a tailgating legend.

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one

March

Central Texas

March Madness.

Lucca Romano stood at the window of his office on the campus of Landry University and gazed out at green grass and purple bearded irises without actually seeing them. In his mind’s eye he focused on another place, another time, when a white ten-passenger van traveled a ribbon of dark asphalt highway bisecting a barren winter plain.

Despite the warm sunshine beaming through the window glass, cold permeated Lucca's bones, and he shuddered as the memory washed over him. Pings and whooshes as text messages arrive and depart from a half-dozen different cellphones. The rhythmic beat of rap. Young men's laughter as a yapping chocolate brown puppy claws his way over the front passenger seat.

Everyone's spirits are high after a win, especially after the first win of the season. Sure, it was just an exhibition game, but it proved that the Midwest State University Ravens are tough competitors.

"Keep the dog in the back," Lucca says, reaching for the little pup. Why had he allowed Seth Seidel to bring that dog home, anyway? The kid lives in a dorm. He has nowhere to keep a dog.

He'd done it because the people selling the puppies out of the back of their truck had been puppy mill people. Lucca's own heart had gone as soft as Seth's upon seeing the "display." Lucca had even loaned the kid some cash to buy the dog.

"Sucker," he mutters, passing the pup now christened "Sparky" to the backseat.

Five minutes later, Sparky is back. Lucca sighs and stretches for the puppy. Sparky wiggles out of his hand and falls, his sharp little claws reaching for purchase and finding the driver's arm. The driver startles and stomps the brake, and in an instant, Lucca's world changes forever.

The wheels lock. Tires skid on black ice. The van slides . . . slides . . . slides in slow motion.

Standing in his sun-drenched office, seventeen months and a thousand miles away from the horror, Lucca swayed and reached out to brace himself against the inevitable crash.

Tires skid off the road, and the van tilts, then rolls, again and again and again. People and possessions fly. The boys scream. Lucca's body jerks against the seat belt. His head hits something hard, and the world goes black.

He regains consciousness with a pounding head; cold, icy air; and panicked voices. "Alan? Oh, God. Alan! Coach! Somebody! Help me! Coach!"

He opens his eyes and sees splatters of blood on the dashboard.

"Coach?"

Jerked back to the present, Lucca glanced over his shoulder to see his graduate assistant in his office doorway, a puzzled expression on his face. How long had he been standing there?

Lucca cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"It's ten after four."

Lucca's gaze shifted to the clock on his wall. He had called a team meeting for four o'clock, so he was late. He was never late. No wonder his assistant looked confused. "I'll be right there."

The young man nodded and left. Lucca wiped away the perspiration beaded on his brow and sucked in a pair of deep breaths, seeking the calm for which he was known at courtside. Unfortunately, calm proved elusive.

When his wall clock chimed the quarter hour, Lucca shook his head. He wiped the beaded perspiration from his brow, then slipped on his suit coat. As he exited his office, he attempted to gather his thoughts. He had a list of instructions to give his team prior to the event that Landry University's athletic department had planned to celebrate the Bobcats' success in the NCAA tournament.

When Lucca took the head-coaching job a year before, he had inherited a group of players who had the raw talent to win. Once he convinced them to buy into his system, he'd been confident they would play well enough to win their conference and make the tournament. When he'd made his traditional preseason bet with his brother Tony, the new head coach at Colorado, he'd predicted a tourney berth and first game win. Making it all the way to the Sweet Sixteen had been a thrill.

A thrill that hadn't lasted beyond the dream he'd had during the flight back to Texas following the tournament loss.

He'd awakened with a jolt somewhere over Alabama, the repressed memories fresh, the terror real. He'd spent the balance of the flight trying to lock them away again, but as the hours passed, it was as if the nightmare had plowed the field of his psyche and kicked up a cloud of pain and misery that had churned into a tempest worthy of a 1930s-era dust storm.

He pushed open the door of the men's locker room and got a whiff of that familiar sweaty scent that had been part of his life for as long as he could remember. Not even the high-dollar NBA venues had been able to get rid of the acrid, musty locker room smell entirely. Today when the stench hit his nostrils, his stomach took a nauseated roll. A storm was brewing inside him.

March Madness.

He walked past a locker whose door hung open. Without a conscious thought, he jabbed it with his elbow, and the metal door clanged shut. Someone had left a pair of athletic shoes on a bench, and one of them had fallen onto the floor into Lucca's path. He swung a hard kick at the sneaker and sent it crashing against the far row of lockers. Then he picked up the other shoe and threw it hard after the first. A janitor mopping the shower floor glanced up ready to complain, but his growl transformed to a gawk when he saw who had made the noise.

Lucca understood the man's surprise. Coach Romano didn't slam things. He didn't kick things. He certainly didn't throw things. He'd patterned his professional behavior after legendary coach Phil Jackson's philosophy of mindful basketball, which included teaching his players to be aggressive without anger or violence and stressing the value of focus and calm in the midst of chaos.

Today, Coach Romano seemed to have lost his Zen.

He exited the locker room and walked out onto the hardwood floor of Bill Litty Arena.

His assistant coaches and players stood with their attention focused on the Jumbotron hanging at center court. A quick glance upward showed Lucca that it was video of their Sweet Sixteen loss, specifically the final two minutes of the game during which his Landry University Bobcats had scored eight unanswered points and came within a whisker of making the biggest upset of the tournament. They'd been a twelve seed playing number one, and they'd held their own against one of the best teams in the country. He'd been so proud of his team.

Why he could barely manage looking at them now, he couldn't figure. On the whole, this was a good group of kids. His point guard had a legitimate shot at making it in the NBA, and what the rest of the team lacked in talent, they made up for with hard work. They'd slipped their size thirteen feet into Cinderella's slippers and danced their way to the Sweet Sixteen. Even before their final game, Lucca had fielded a call from a representative of a prominent "basketball school" who had wanted to congratulate him on his team's season. Rumor had it that the school's icon of a coach planned to retire after one more season, so Lucca believed it had been a courting call.

His sister Gabi's words whispered in his mind. "You're a star now, bro."

Shame washed over him, and he set his teeth against it.

His players groaned as the replay showed the missed jumper that had broken their streak. "You should have passed it back to me," the power forward said. "I'd have made it."

"I should have kept it myself," the point guard fired back.

"Don't let Coach hear you say that," the center said. "Surrender the 'me' . . ."

"For the 'we,'?" the others finished, quoting one of Lucca's favorite sayings with some laughter.

"Lame," the point guard said, giving a dismissive snort.

At the sound, Lucca halted midstep. His team was mocking him.

His temper flashed. Don't they know how lucky they are? Don't they have a clue? They are healthy and whole and playing a game. An effing game! On scholarship! They're not broken, confined to a wheelchair.

They're not dead.

Fury coursed through Lucca's veins. He imagined himself giving his star player a swift boot in the ass. Instead, he barked out a command, "Everybody to the baseline. We're running ladders."

His players turned to stare at him, their expressions ranging from incredulous to smirking. His voice deadly calm, Lucca asked, "You think I'm kidding?"

No one spoke. Lucca focused on the point guard. "Norris?"

The young man hesitated, then grinned. "Yeah, I do, Coach. Season's over."

Lucca folded his arms and put all of his angry disgust into his glare.

After a moment, Norris's cocky smile died. Lucca jerked his head in a "get going" motion. His team shared a shocked look, then started running.

For the next half hour, Lucca drilled them hard, his voice harsh, his manner cold, which wasn't at all his customary way of coaching. More than once he caught a player darting him a "WTF?" look. Twice his assistant coach approached him to inform him of the time, but Lucca stopped him with a flick of a hand. Only when people began filing into the arena for the celebration did he send his team to the showers, giving

them fifteen minutes to clean up and return to the court. He heard the grumbling and saw the scowls, but his players weren't stupid. They knew not to cross him today.

Too bad he had a boss to deal with, he acknowledged as he spied the athletic director's sixty-something secretary approaching him with a scolding frown on her face.

"For heaven's sake, Lucca," Mrs. Richie said. "Mr. Hopkins is not at all happy. He has a group of donors waiting to meet you and Jamal Norris. The AV people wanted access to the arena floor an hour ago so they could set up their microphones. I have parents who expected family time with their students before tonight's event knocking on the door of my office. Why in the world did you hold a practice this afternoon?"

Lucca closed his eyes. He didn't care about the AV folks, and helicopter parents made him crazy. But schmoozing with the alumni and soliciting donations was a big part his job. He could be good at it when he wanted. Today, he simply didn't have it in him to make nice. "My team needed it."

"Well, you are wanted in the director's office ASAP. This practice completely disrupted our schedule."

Mrs. Richie reminded him enough of his late, beloved grandmother that he swallowed his caustic response. "I'll go right up."

She nodded, then checked her watch. "And Jamal?"

Lucca had no intention of singling out his point guard that way. The press did enough of it as it was. While it was true that Norris had turned in a stellar performance in the tournament, all the attention had overinflated the young man's opinion of himself to an extent that Lucca believed was detrimental to both Jamal and the team. He searched for a compromise.

"You can let AD Hopkins know that I'll invite our visitors into the locker room at the end of the night. That should make everybody happy."

Surprise widened Mrs. Richie's eyes. Lucca never allowed visitors into the locker room. "I'll call him and tell him you are on your way."

Due to the mood he was in, Lucca considered the ten minutes he spent glad-handing the donors to be excruciating. He found the congratulations and back slaps annoying. When one of the donors asked him if he'd like new televisions for the team's rec room, he almost told the man to send his money to the girls' swim team. Those young women had heart and rode to their meets in a six-year-old van that made Lucca cringe every time he saw it parked in the lot.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the athletic director announced that the time had come to adjourn to the arena. As the men filed out of the office, an investment banker from New York stepped in front of Lucca and put a hand against his chest. "If I can have just a moment, Coach?"

Lucca sucked in a breath as the urge to slap the man's hand away rolled over him like a tidal wave. Damn, he was on edge. He'd better get himself together or he just might do his career irreparable harm. Would that be so terrible?

The donor didn't seem to notice Lucca's bad attitude. He was too busy slipping something into Lucca's jacket pocket. "Some friends and I want to make sure you know how pleased we are to have you here at

Landry. You're a great coach. You proved it last year when you motivated that ragtag group of kids at Midwest State all the way to an NCAA berth and—"

"Those kids played their hearts out," Lucca interrupted, nausea churning in his stomach.

"Sure they did. Sure they did. But you knew how to motivate them, didn't you? Dedicating their season to their dead teammates. That was a brilliant bit of coaching."

Brilliant coaching, my ass. "That was the team's idea," Lucca said carefully. "It was a difficult time for—"

The donor talked over him. "What you did with this team this season . . . what can I say? Jamal Norris had no intention of attending Landry until we managed to steal you away from Midwest State, and Norris is the reason we played in Atlanta this year. If you can manage to keep him out of the NBA's clutches for another year . . . a national championship is within our grasp. You're a special coach, Lucca Romano. You've got a great future ahead of you, and we want to do everything in our power to make sure that future is here at Landry."

He gave Lucca's pocket a little pat, then stepped back. "We want you to remember our gratitude when the Dukes and Kentuckys of the world come calling. And don't you worry, we'll see that you get regular reminders, too. Now, we'd better hurry to catch up with the others. Don't want the festivities to start without us, do we, Coach?"

Don't call me Coach, Lucca wanted to say.

The donor motioned for Lucca to precede him from the office. Lucca shook his head. "You go ahead. I have to take a leak."

The donor gave him a knowing grin, dropped his gaze to Lucca's pocket, then winked. He obviously thought Lucca couldn't wait to check out the "gratitude" in his pocket. The man couldn't have been more wrong.

Lucca was battling the need to puke.

Ragtag players. Knew how to motivate.

The van sliding, rolling. The screams. Dear Lord, the screams.

"My son," Mrs. Seidel said at the funeral, her eyes stricken, her tone broken. "Did he suffer?"

"Coach. Help me. Please, Coach."

Bile rose in Lucca's throat, and he headed for the lavatory connected to the athletic director's office. He made it to the commode just in time.

Once the spasms ended, he went to the sink, turned on the water, rinsed his mouth, and then splashed his face. When he glanced at his reflection in the mirror, he wanted to vomit all over again.

Instead, he exited the bathroom and his boss's office. Rather than following the pulse of music that now rose from the arena, he turned toward his own office, went inside, and locked the door behind him.

Then, Lucca lost it.

Breathing hard, seeing little beyond the haze of rage and heartache and guilt roaring through him, he swept his arm across his desktop, sending everything crashing to the floor. Next he eyed the trophies on the wall shelf. Crash. He picked up his notebook computer and threw it onto the floor, hard, then kicked it for good measure.

Within minutes, he'd trashed his entire office. With nothing whole left to destroy, he turned on himself, balling up his fist and punching the wall.

He was pretty sure he broke some bones. The pain felt good. It felt deserved.

Using his bloody, damaged hand, Lucca removed the folded check from his pocket and looked at it. Fifty thousand dollars. Because he'd felt sorry for a dog, killed two kids, and paralyzed another? He tossed the bloodstained check away. It floated toward the floor and landed atop shards of a shattered crystal trophy.

Lucca quit the room and the campus. Within days he'd departed the state, and by the end of the month, he'd fled the country. Lucca Ryan Romano couldn't live with himself. He was done.

March Madness.

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