

EMILY MARCH



A Callahan Carol

USA Today Bestselling Author

GERALYN
DAWSON

A CALLAHAN CAROL

by

Geralyn Dawson/Emily March

Copyright © Geralyn Dawson/Emily March, 2010
All rights reserved

For My Readers

A few years ago, I was in the midst of a writing funk, ready to throw in the towel on this publishing career of mine and move on to something else. Then I started hearing from you. You offered me support, encouragement, and repeated demands of When do we get John Callahan's story! You helped me find the joy in writing again and for that, I am extremely grateful. Now I have a new a pseudonym and a new outlook on the writing life, but I continue to write about those things that matter most to me: love, home and family, and friendship.

In that spirit, I have written this story for you. It is my gift to you, my way of saying thank you.

I hope you enjoy A Callahan Carol. Merry Christmas!

*Love,
Geralyn/Emily*

Forward

A Summary of Prior Events

Once upon a time following years of infertility, the beloved wife of Texas oilman-and-rancher, Branch Callahan, gave birth to a son. A religious woman, Margaret Mary named her child for the apostle Matthew, and life in Brazos Bend was good. The following year, the Callahan marriage again was blessed, this time with identical twin boys, Mark and Luke. Four years later, Branch and Margaret Mary welcomed yet another son. He was given the name John and he was treasured by all.

The Callahan family lived, loved, and thrived in their small, Texas Hill Country town. As children, the mischievous boys earned the nickname Holy Terrors, but they were good boys at heart and the townspeople tolerated their highjinks.

Sadly, when the boys were in their teens, tragedy struck the family. Margaret Mary fell ill and died.

Branch sank into mourning so dark, deep and powerful that he neglected his sons completely. Because of Branch's depression his boys essentially lost both parents. The boys dealt with their own intense grief by elevating mischief-making to recklessness

which culminated one night in an act of drunken carelessness that burned a local factory—the town’s largest employer—to the ground.

In the aftermath, an angry and bitter Branch Callahan banished his boys from Brazos Bend.

Years passed. The boys grew to men. Fine men. Matt’s calling took him to clandestine service with the CIA. Mark found his place as a Military Intelligence investigator, and Luke worked undercover for the DEA. John’s talent for languages took him to the State Department. As adults, the Callahan brothers reconnected and eventually reconciled with their father—until tragedy again struck the family.

John was attacked, kidnapped, and held for ransom by Eastern European criminals. Branch’s misguided efforts to secure his release failed, and the Callahans learned that their beloved son and brother was dead. The Callahan family broke.

Years passed. The surviving sons remained estranged from their father until, one by one, exceptional women entered—or in Mark’s case, re-entered—the lives of the Callahan men. First, Luke met Maddie Kincaid, aka Baby Dagger, the infamous rocker love child who helped mend the fence between father and son. Then Matt tangled with Torie Bradshaw; loving her precipitated his reconciliation with Branch. Finally, the healing of Mark’s damaged relationship with his ex, Annabelle Monroe, allowed forgiveness to enter his heart. On the occasion of their wedding, they and the rest of the Callahan family received a priceless gift from an old enemy: news that John was still alive.

The Callahans were ecstatic. Each of them reached out to contacts all over the world trying to locate him. Months passed, then years. Despite vigorous and intensive search, the Callahans never uncovered so much as a sliver of evidence to support their enemy’s claim.

Was it just a vicious lie? Another wound inflicted by the cruelest of enemies? Privately, Mark began to wonder. Lying awake in bed in the middle of the night, Luke despaired. Each time

he held his young son, Johnny, Matt fought back fears that the boy's namesake no longer lived.

Branch Callahan, the aging, but still stubborn patriarch of the Callahan family, remained convinced that one day, John Gabriel Callahan would walk through the front door of Callahan House.

At least, he did until John's most recent birthday. Faced with yet another milestone that tore his heart in two, the months and years of futile searching finally defeated him. Branch lost his faith, his hope, and his love.

Branch Callahan became the Scrooge of Brazos Bend.

Part One

Brazos Bend, Texas

“I can’t believe Grandpa Branch wants to cancel Christmas,” seven-year-old Johnny Callahan declared as he hopped down from the cab of his father’s pickup on a clear, crisp December morning. He kicked a brittle leaf from a cottonwood tree that lay in the driveway of his grandfather’s house as he waited for his father to open the built-in tool box on his truck.

Johnny’s cousin, nine-year-old Samantha, put her hands on her hips and frowned at the facade of Callahan House. “Grandpa Branch is sad. My mama says he’s lost his belief in miracles because no one has been able to find Uncle John. Christmas is all about miracles.”

Johnny spied a big black beetle crossing the driveway. He ran to it and squashed it with his tennis shoe. “My mom says he’ll be really mad when he gets home and sees that we’ve decorated and put up the Wonderland.”

“My mom says the same thing.” Samantha tucked a strand of curly red hair behind her ear as she stood patiently beside the truck.

“Your mothers are brilliant women.” Johnny’s dad, Matt Callahan, handed child-sized leather tool belts to his son and niece.

“So...why are we trying to make Grandpa mad?” Johnny asked as he buckled the belt around his waist.

Matt gazed out over the lawn. “We’re not trying to make him angry, but the fact is, he can’t cancel Christmas. Not the Callahan Wonderland display, anyway. It’s a tradition in this town. It’s important to our friends and neighbors.”

Samantha’s freckled nose bobbed up and down as she nodded. “Mrs. Branson told my mom that for her family, it wouldn’t be Christmas without a visit to the Wonderland.”

“I know I would miss it.” Johnny followed his father’s gaze out over the huge, empty lawn at Cavanaugh House and imagined how it would look at the end of the day. “Did you love the Wonderland when you were a boy, Dad?”

“Absolutely. I still love it.”

“Me, too!” Samantha said.

“Me, three!” Johnny agreed, then added, “I wonder if Stinkweed will love it four.”

“Better not let your mom hear you calling your sister that again, Johnny,” Matt Callahan cautioned. The toddler’s real name was Daisy. Johnny’s parents had adopted her last fall after the girl’s parents died in a plane crash.

“She calls her Buttercup,” Johnny protested.

His dad shook his head, then asked, “You ready to get to work?”

Samantha nodded and Johnny called out, “I’m ready!”

To illustrate, he pulled the kid-sized hammer out of its loop and smashed a pecan lying at the edge of the driveway, then he kicked it into the grass in just about the spot where they would put Santa’s workshop. “Dibs on putting Santa’s feet in the bucket.”

Samantha folded her arms and scowled. “Hey, no fair! You did it last year.”

Matt frowned at Johnny over the top of his sunglasses. “It’s Samantha’s turn.”

Johnny sighed. *Darn*. He’d hoped they wouldn’t think of that. Putting Santa’s feet in the bucket was the final step in decorating his grandpa’s house for Christmas, sorta like putting the star on the top of the Christmas tree. It was special.

Oh, well. The whole day was special. Excitement added a skip to Johnny’s step as he followed his dad toward the storage building in the backyard.

The Callahan Christmas Wonderland yard decorations were the oldest and the biggest and the best in Brazos Bend. Johnny’s great-grandmother had begun the collection back in the 1930’s and his grandmother had continued the tradition and added to it. Now the displays filled the entire yard, and Grandpa Branch’s yard was humongous.

People drove from all over the county to see the Wonderland at Callahan House at Christmas. Samantha’s twin sister Catherine said that people even drove over from Fort Worth to see the show. Johnny didn’t know if he believed that—Catherine told stories a lot—but cars did line up for blocks.

The hinges on the Christmas storage shed squeaked loudly as his dad opened the door. Johnny peeked inside, then gasped with delight at his first sight of the bubble robot. Next to the last decoration in the display--Santa’s workshop where a tired Santa sits in a rocker and soaks his feet on Christmas morning-- the bubble-blowing robot was his absolute favorite.

His dad handed a coil of yellow extension cord to him and a plastic tub full of twinkle lights to Samantha. “All right, you two. You know the drill.”

“Yes, sir, Uncle Matt.” Sam toted the bin toward the front yard. Johnny looped the cord around his shoulder and followed.

Johnny had made three trips between the shed and the front yard when another pickup rolled to the curb and parked. The doors

opened. Two men climbed out. Both wore jeans and flannel shirts and looked so much alike that, as usual, Johnny had trouble telling them apart.

The truck was Uncle Luke's so he guessed that the driver, wearing the blue shirt, must be him. The uncle in the red shirt waved and said, "Hey, Chip. What's with the empty yard? I thought you were going to have all the work done before we got here."

Now, Johnny was sure which uncle was which. Uncle Mark was the one who liked to call him Chip (as in *chip off the old block*). "You know what Dad says, Uncle Mark. That's what you get for thinking."

"Where's your cousin?" Uncle Luke held up a purple TCU Horned Frogs windbreaker. "Her mom sent a jacket for her."

"Here I am, Daddy." Samantha came around the corner of the house with another box of lights. "I don't need a jacket."

He tossed her the windbreaker. "Put it on anyway so I don't get into trouble."

With his uncles' arrival, work began in earnest. Soon the Old Woman in the Shoe display had joined the Bubble Robot, along with the Gingerbread House and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. When the Christmas shed was empty, Johnny's dad made a phone call and within minutes the work crew from Brazos Bend Electric arrived. Next, the big truck from Brazos Bend Storage showed up. It held the displays that were too big to fit in the Christmas shed.

While the crew unloaded the truck and the head electrician directed the installation, Dad and Uncle Luke went to work stringing lights on Grandpa Branch's house. The kids helped Uncle Mark place the lights on the bushes. With the setting of every spotlight, the connection of each new string of lights, Johnny's excitement grew. It was hard but exciting work. Within hours they'd turned Callahan House into the familiar—and magical—Callahan Christmas Wonderland.

Johnny was so proud he'd been born a Callahan.

"What time is the Christmas play rehearsal at church supposed to be over?" he asked Samantha as they ate peanut butter sandwiches for lunch.

"Not until 1:00," she replied, swiping at a smear of grape jam with the back of her hand. "I'm so glad Mom isn't making me do that this year. I always had to be a shepherd."

Johnny wasn't in the play this year, either. Being on stage made him feel like throwing up, so Dad said he didn't have to do it anymore. He glanced at the clock. "I hope they get here pretty soon. I heard my mom tell your mom that we'd better have everything done before Grandpa Branch comes home."

At 1:20, Johnny's mother and aunts arrived with more of his cousins—Catherine, their little sister Savannah, and Uncle Mark's kids, Emma and Tanner. Uncle Mark's son Chris was grown up and he'd taken Grandpa Branch to the Dallas Cowboy football game, which was why the family had been able to assemble the Wonderland without interference.

They put the finishing touches on the Wonderland, and the family gathered around when Samantha put Santa's feet in the bucket. Everyone cheered, then headed inside where the women took charge of decorating. Aunt Maddie hung the Christmas stockings, Aunt Annabelle put up the wreaths, and Johnny's Mom wrapped a fresh evergreen garland around the banister of the staircase. Callahan House began to smell like Christmas. Then it was time to tackle the tree.

Johnny heard his mother tell Uncle Luke, "No telling what we're going to find in the library. I almost wish Mark wasn't so handy picking locks."

"Hey now," Luke protested. "I'm just as good as Mark."

"Neither of you are as good as me," Johnny's dad declared.

Aunt Maddie and Mom rolled their eyes. Aunt Annabelle sighed and said, "Somebody open the door, would you, please? We

don't have a lot of time. Chris called an hour ago to give me a heads up that the Cowboys game had ended. He'll be back with Branch by five."

The three brothers looked at one another, then Johnny's dad said, "Luke, you've always been the fastest. Go ahead."

"The Callahan men's talents continue to amaze me," Aunt Maddie said when the door swung open minutes later.

"So does their stubbornness," Mom added.

"And Branch is the king of stubborn." Aunt Annabelle shook her head. "If I ever had any doubts, this latest nonsense with the library would have convinced me. Leaving the Christmas tree up until John came home was a lovely gesture, but if he didn't want it around anymore, he should have had it taken down. Locking Christmas away solved nothing."

"At least it was an artificial tree," Matt observed, following the women into the room.

Aunt Maddie clucked her tongue. "Look at the dust in here. We should have picked that lock weeks ago."

"How long has he left it up?"

"Three years at least," Uncle Mark said.

Uncle Luke added, "Maybe four."

"We could count the presents and see," Cousin Catherine suggested.

Uncle Luke said, "I think it's time to store John's gifts somewhere out of sight."

The aunts and his mom shared a look, then Aunt Annabelle said, "Maybe it's time to—"

"Donate them," Mom finished.

Aunt Maddie added, "To charity."

"No!" snapped all three Callahan men simultaneously. Luke added, "Out of sight is fine. Then let's get our gifts to Branch under the tree."

The family went to work dusting and decorating and sprucing up the artificial spruce standing in a corner of the room. Uncle Mark put Christmas music on the stereo at Aunt Annabelle's request; Mom put the cookies she'd mixed up that morning into the oven to bake. Aunt Maddie put the spiced cider on the stove to heat, and soon the scent of apples and cinnamon filled the air.

When the cookies were done, the cider hot, and the decorating and cleaning complete, everyone got a snack and went outside. They took their traditional seats on the curb in front of the house across the street while Catherine and Samantha ran up and down the street, knocking on neighbors' doors and telling them that the big moment was at hand. Finally, at his mother's signal, Johnny's dad flipped the main switch.

Callahan's Christmas Wonderland came to life.

Lights blazed, the displays moved. The mannequins in choir robes started singing. Johnny and his cousins clapped their hands, jumped up and down, and shouted with delight. The Callahan men kissed their wives, and the neighbors cheered and called "Merry Christmas."

Cousin Chris's red car turned the corner at the end of the block a few minutes later and Aunt Maddie called out a warning.

Johnny could hear Grandpa Branch's angry roar before the car came to a stop. Uncle Mark said, "Batten down your red noses, reindeers. It's gonna be a bumpy ride."

"Don we now our chain mail armor," Uncle Luke sang to the tune of *Deck the Halls*.

"Maddie?" Uncle Luke said to his wife. "Why don't you be point man on this? You've always been able to twist Branch around your little finger."

"Not hardly," she replied as she stepped toward the car.

As Grandpa Branch threw open the passenger side door, he bellowed, "Christopher, get my damned walker out of the trunk."

“Welcome home, Branch,” Aunt Maddie said. “How was the ball game? Did the Cowboys win?”

He ignored her question, ignored her, and shot an angry glare toward his sons. “Turn it off. Take it down.”

Aunt Maddie sent a “help me” look over her shoulder toward Uncle Luke. He and his brothers rose and joined her. “Let’s take this inside, Branch,” Dad said.

“No. I’m going inside. You are gonna take that crap off my damned lawn.”

“Watch your language, Branch,” Luke demanded. “The kids are here.”

Grandpa Branch scowled, yanked his walker from Chris’s hands, and shuffled toward his front door. Chris shut his trunk, rubbed the back of his neck, then grimaced. “I tried to soften him up about Christmas on the ride back, but he wasn’t hearing anything of it.”

“The old goat,” Uncle Mark muttered.

“Actually, make that the old Grinch,” Matt grumbled.

“He’s hurting,” Aunt Maddie said, her voice soft.

“Yeah, well, we’re all hurting,” Uncle Luke replied, just as the first cars full of Wonderland viewers arrived.

Mom clapped her hands. “Okay, kiddos, looks like the Brazos Bend grapevine has done its job. Santa hats and candy canes are in my back seat. Take your places.”

“Do you have any reindeer antlers this year, Aunt Torie?” Uncle Mark’s son Tanner asked. “I like wearing antlers better.”

Johnny’s mom ruffled his cousin’s hair. “I have a pair of reindeer antlers with your name on it.” Then she looked at his dad and uncles and said, “Good luck, you guys.”

“We’ll need it.”

Johnny watched the Callahan sons follow their father into Callahan House before joining his aunts and cousins in the annual tradition of passing out candy to those who came to view the

Wonderland. Cars passed by the house in a steady stream and soon, Johnny's candy bag was empty. Holding it up, he called, "Mom, I'm going for a refill."

She waved at him, then helped Aunt Annabelle's one-year-old pass out a piece of candy.

After refilling his bag, Johnny paused. He needed to pee. That presented a dilemma. Mom would have a fit if he peed outdoors, but she wouldn't want him going inside, either. After a moment's deliberation (and because he wanted to know what was happening inside) he headed around back toward the kitchen door. As he reached for the knob, he heard Samantha whisper loudly, "Hey, Johnny. Did you come to spy on the grown-ups, too?"

He wasn't about to tell a girl he needed to pee. "Yes."

"I'm worried at Grandpa Branch. He looked really mad."

And really old, Johnny thought. Really, *really* old.

Samantha continued, "Let's go in. But be quiet!"

"You're the one doing all the talking," Johnny grumbled as he carefully turned the knob, then pushed the door open and stepped inside. Samantha was right on his heels.

Now he needed to pee even worse. Doing things he shouldn't always did that to him.

Samantha moved around him to take the lead—as usual. He didn't really mind because if they were caught, she'd catch the worst of it. They entered the kitchen, and he could hear the sound of raised voices coming from the far side of the house. The sound pulled them forward like a magnet. When they heard Grandpa Branch shout out a curse that would have grounded them for a month if they'd said it, Johnny and Samantha shared a round-eyed look.

"Give me back my gun!" Branch shouted.

"No!" Matt shot back. "You're acting crazy, Dad."

“Our kids are outside,” Luke added. “If you want to destroy more than seventy years of family history and tradition so bad, then take a golf club and do it.”

Johnny and Samantha crept forward until they stood just outside of the library. The door hung open wide. Samantha dropped down on her hands and knees and peered around the edge, then gestured that it was safe for Johnny to cross to the other side. Holding his breath, he darted past the open doorway. He knelt and mimicked his cousin’s stance. Now he really, really, really needed to pee, but the showdown inside the library had him rooted to the spot.

“The Callahan family is more than a Christmas lawn display.” Grandpa Branch declared. “Our name is all over this town. Doing away with that nonsense outside won’t make any difference at all.”

“It’ll make a difference to our kids,” Uncle Mark fired back, his stance wide, his arms crossed, and his eyes angry.

“And frankly,” Dad added, his hands braced on his hips and his jaw jutting forward, “it makes a difference to us, too. The Wonderland is part of our lives. Part of our family and our home. Part of our Christmas.”

“He’s right.” Uncle Luke leaned against one of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, his legs crossed at his ankles. His arms were crossed, too, and he looked mad. “Those years when I was away from Brazos Bend for the holidays, I always made the effort to find some sort of Christmas display to visit. It helped me feel . . . less alone.” He shrugged. “Some of them were bigger than ours, but none of them were better. It *is* important, Branch.”

“It’s a lie! That’s what it is. Think about the buzz words people spout this time of year. Peace on Earth. Joy to the World. It’s all bull. There is no peace in Christmas. No joy. Certainly no hope. It’s all a lie and be damned if I’ll be a part of it any longer.”

Johnny's eyes went even rounder when he saw his grandfather reach for his cane and then swipe the hooked end toward the Christmas tree.

"I want it gone!" Grandpa Branch shouted. "I want it *over!*"

The tree toppled and crashed to the floor. Glass ornaments shattered. Tears stung Johnny's eyes.

Then Grandpa dropped the cane, clutched at his chest, and fell to the floor beside the Christmas tree.

Uncle Mark said, "Dad?"

Uncle Luke said, "I'll call 911."

Johnny's daddy knelt beside Grandpa Branch, placed his fingers against his throat and spoke in a grim tone. "I can't get a pulse."

"He's dead?" Uncle Mark and Uncle Luke asked together.

When his dad didn't say anything else, Johnny Callahan's heart broke.

Part Two

Coma.

That's what Mom and Dad said was wrong with his grandfather. They used some other big medical words that Johnny couldn't understand or remember, but what really mattered was that Grandpa Branch was asleep and not waking up.

Sixteen days had passed since the ambulance roared up to Callahan House to take him to the hospital, five days since they'd brought him home and installed him in his bedroom because Johnny had overheard Uncle Luke say that Branch would want to die at Callahan House in his own bed.

It had been the worst two weeks Johnny could remember. Mom couldn't seem to stop crying and he'd hardly seen his dad. Branch Callahan's sons all but lived at the hospital. Samantha said that all the grown-ups felt guilty because even though the doctors said otherwise, they thought that decorating for Christmas had brought on the attack.

They hadn't taken down the Wonderland, but the lights stayed off. In the library, the Christmas tree lay on the floor where it had fallen. Nobody felt like cleaning it up. Aunt Maddie had

tried to go into the room and clean twice, but both times she'd started crying so hard she had to stop.

In his bedroom, Grandpa Branch lay against dark blue sheets, his face as white as the snow that had begun to fall. Any other time, Johnny would be thrilled to see snow in Brazos Bend, since it had only happened twice before in his whole life. Now he didn't care about the snow. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and the holiday was shaping up to be the worst Christmas ever.

He sat on the front stoop at Callahan House, watching the neighbor kids making snow angels in the yard across the street. He tried to work up the energy to go play with them, but he just didn't have the heart. He sighed heavily, watching his breath fog on the cold winter air, and wishing he still believed in Santa. He'd make an emergency trip to the mall and ask old Kris Kringle to bring a get well gift for Grandpa Branch.

The door opened behind him and Samantha came out. Tears slipped down her cheeks. Johnny tensed and swallowed hard. "Is Grandpa. . .?"

"The doctor just told my dad to . . ." Her breath caught on a sob. ". . . to prepare the family. He said Grandpa's body is shutting down."

"What does that mean?"

"He's dying. The doctor said he probably has only a few days left."

Johnny shoved to his feet. "Well, they need to give him medicine and make it stop."

"That's what I said. Aunt Torie said the doctors had done all they can."

"They need to call different doctors, ones who know more."

Tears stung Johnny's eyes as he turned away from his cousin. His gaze landed on the manger scene and he thought about

Jesus and the miracle of His birth. Samantha's gaze followed his and a moment later, she murmured, "Maybe that's it."

"What's it?"

"It's the season of miracles, isn't it? Maybe God will give one to Grandpa Branch."

Hope flickered to life inside Johnny. "Maybe He will help us find the right doctor!"

His cousin frowned. "I don't think the grown-ups are going to start looking for new doctors, Johnny. I heard your dad tell mine that Dr. Reed was the best in the business."

"So what will we do?"

Samantha gave the manger scene another long look, her stare fastening on the angels that hung above it. "We'll just have to do the work and find a doctor."

"How are we supposed to do that? We're just kids."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Well Google one, of course."

Five minutes later, she sat at the computer in the family room with her hands paused over the keyboard. She entered three words: miracle, healing, and doctor. The search returned 185,000 results.

She clicked on the top result. The website loaded. A big Victorian house stood at the base of a forested mountain, a clear mountain creek bubbling in the foreground. "Angel's Rest, Healing Center and Spa," Samantha read. "Angels. That sounds good, don't you think?"

"It doesn't look much like a hospital," Johnny said.

"We tried a hospital. It didn't work. This says it's a healing center. Grandpa Branch needs healing."

She reached for the phone and dialed the number, then pushed the button to put the call on speaker. After two rings, a woman's voice answered. "Angel's Rest. Celeste Blessing speaking. How may I help you today?"

“My name is Samantha Callahan. My cousin Johnny Callahan is with me. We’re from Brazos Bend, Texas. We need a miracle, ma’am.”

“A miracle? Two days before Christmas?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Johnny said.

“Well, children. I have a feeling that you’ve come to the right place.”

#

Branch Callahan floated in a misty place. He wasn’t dead; he was sure about that. But he wasn’t exactly brimming with life, either.

He might be asleep, but he doubted it. He had no sense of the passage of time. At first, he’d believed he was dreaming but that didn’t feel right anymore. He had no recall of anything after he’d pulled down the Christmas tree in his library, when, today? Yesterday? A year ago?

The uncertainty was unsettling.

As was the fact that he couldn’t move his body. Not his legs or his feet. Not his arms or his hands. He couldn’t roll over or sit up. At least he didn’t hurt anywhere for a change. He did have that going for him. Still, he sure would like to wake up. Or die. Dying would be good—unless the redemption he’d been trying to earn the last few years fell short of the mark.

He wished something would happen. Anything.

As soon as the thought formed, he got his wish.

He heard a sound, a rumble that slowly grew louder. Branch attempted to turn toward the sound . . . and to his surprise, he could do it. He spied a dark shadow in the white-gray mist. The noise intensified. A motor, he identified. A motorcycle? He tried to sit up and this time, his body accommodated him. *Well, what do you know.*

He focused on the shadow, holding his breath, until first a black tire emerged from the mist. It *was* a motorcycle. A Harley?

No, a Honda Gold Wing. Driven by a figure dressed in white leather trimmed in gold and wearing a golden helmet.

Could he be dead, after all? Had Elvis come to drive him off to the Land of Jelly Donuts?

The motor switched off and in the sudden silence, he'd have sworn he heard harp music. The figure heeled down the kickstand, dismounted, pulled off white leather gloves, then reached up to remove the helmet.

Not Elvis, Branch thought as a face was revealed, but a woman. A woman of indefinite age.

Her silver-gray hair suggested she was older, but her face remained unlined and her rosy complexion had a youthful glow. She moved her gently rounded body in a sprightly manner as she advanced toward him and smiled. "Hello, Branch Callahan."

Suddenly, he felt a tingling in his throat and tried to speak. His voice emerged raspy and weak, but he did have a voice. "Who are you? Where am I? What the hel-uh-heck is going on?"

"My name is Celeste Blessing. I have been sent here on a special mission."

"Sent here by whom?"

"A great and powerful force. A force that—if you allow it—can make an enormous positive impact upon your life. First, however, you must open your heart to it."

"A force?" he asked warily. "What kind of force?" She wasn't carrying a pitchfork and he saw no signs of a pointy tail on her behind, but hey, the Trickster came by that nickname honestly.

"Love. You must open your heart to love, Branch Callahan."

Branch scowled. "What sort of nonsense is this. I have plenty of love in my heart. I have so much love in my heart that it's killing me."

"Ah. Do you? Or is something else dousing the flame of your love?"

Her smile was beautiful and warm, and Branch could feel it deep within his bones. She held out her hand toward him. “Come with me, Branch Callahan. Let me show you the truth.”

Suddenly, he was standing—without pain, without needing his walker. He glanced down and noticed he was wearing his own set of leathers, only his were black. Now that was keen.

Celeste handed him a black motorcycle helmet, then climbed onto the motorcycle and motioned for Branch to take the passenger position. She started the engine, and they took off through the mist. Branch heard “Oh Come All Ye Faithful” piping through the helmet into his ears.

Christmas. Okay, maybe he hadn’t drifted as long as he’d thought. Or, maybe this entire thing was a dream.

The music segued into “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Branch frowned. Surely he wasn’t having a Jimmy Stewart *It’s a Wonderful Life* moment!

Even as the thought formed, the Gold Wing emerged from the mists onto the street in front of Callahan House. The blasted Christmas Wonderland was still up on his lawn, lit up and blasting Christmas cheer all over town, but something about the scene was different. That something bothered him, nagged at him, but he couldn’t put his finger on the problem until the front door opened and four little boys burst from within, followed by their mother. That’s when he got it. The Christmas Wonderland was missing some of the newer displays and the trees and shrubs around the house were smaller.

Branch swallowed hard. Oh, no. He was already haunted by enough things in life. He didn’t need this.

This wasn’t a Jimmy Stewart moment. It wasn’t even a dream about the Grinch. He wasn’t dealing with Clarence the friendly angel or the Whos of Whoville. Gathering in his front yard were the Ghosts of Christmas Past.

Branch’s stomach rolled. He was about to be Scrooged.

#

Two days before Christmas on the second day of the elementary school's holiday break, Margaret Mary Callahan called to her sons. "All right, you little reindeer. If you've run off enough steam and are ready to settle down, the Christmas cookies are ready to be decorated."

"Hooray!" Matt Callahan replied.

"Dibs on the red icing," Mark said.

"No fair," Luke protested. "You got to be red last time."

John nodded briskly, his little boy's eyes round and wide. "He's right, Mom. Remember? Mark put it all over me and said it was blood."

Margaret clicked her tongue. "Yes, I remember. He got into trouble for it, too. This year we're not going to fight over frosting colors. You each have your own set of colors."

"Yeah." Matt darted toward the door. "We can all get bloody."

"The Christmas Spirit is alive and well at the Callahans," their mother joked.

The children slid into their customary chairs around the kitchen table and for the next hour, with Christmas carols playing softly on the stereo, labored over turning sugar cookie Christmas trees into works of iced art. Branch came home just as the boys were finishing up the last of the cookies, and as his sons competed to offer him first taste of their edible works of art, he stacked the four cookies, and did a Cookie Monster impression by shoving them all into his mouth at once and saying, "Cookies."

The children dissolved into fits of giggles. Margaret sighed, shook her head, then poured him a glass of milk. After Branch washed down the cookies, he asked his family about their day. The older boys told him about the pick-up football game they'd had at the elementary school playground. Margaret relayed a story about the Angel Tree project the church did for the local nursing home.

Branch then shared details about his workday but as soon as he shifted to the subject of mineral rights acquisition, the older boys wandered off.

John hung around. Pretty soon, he crawled into his father's lap. "Would you read me a story, Daddy?"

"Sure. What do you want?"

"The Grinch!" John exclaimed. "He's my favorite!"

"Why is that?" Branch asked his son as if this weren't an exchange they held every single time Branch read the book to the boy.

"Because he reminds me of you."

At that point, as always, Branch attacked with tickles. John giggled, squirmed, and giggled some more. When his mother finally handed the beloved book to his father to read, he curled against Branch, stuck his thumb in his mouth, and listened quietly and intently.

When Branch finished, he shut the book and expected John to scramble down and wander away or ask for a second story. Instead, his youngest son remained where he was.

Branch glanced down at John. The boy wasn't asleep. Branch could tell by his expression that something was bothering him. "What's wrong, Buddy?"

Another thirty seconds dragged by before John spoke. "Daddy, Brett Parker said Santa Claus isn't real. I asked Matt and Mark and Luke if he was fibbing, but they wouldn't tell. Was he, Daddy? Is Santa Claus just a story?"

Branch sucked in a breath, then lifted his head to gaze with wild, worried eyes toward his wife. *Santa Claus? What was he supposed to do? This wasn't his job!*

Margaret took care of the hard stuff with the kids. She handled these sorts of questions. Shoot, she probably knew the complete text of "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus" letter by heart!

But judging by the sympathetic smile she gave him, she had no intention of handling this one.

Branch gazed down into his son's pleading eyes, and sent up a silent prayer. *Just one more year. One more Christmas. Please?*

Quickly, he arrived at a plan. "You don't listen to Brett Parker, John. What you need to know is that I believe in Santa, but I understand how a man can have doubts. Tell you what let's do. I'll put on my thinking cap and try to come up with a way to prove it. Would that help?"

The boy brightened. "Sure, Daddy."

"Good. Now, go find your brothers and tell them I'm in the mood to play catch. I'll meet everyone in the backyard in ten minutes."

"Yippee!"

When he was alone with his wife in the kitchen, he took her in his arms, buried his face in her hair, and groaned. "That was awful. I want one more year. I want this Christmas."

"I do, too. You did a great job, Daddy."

"Do you think so?"

"I do. I want one more Christmas, too. I can't wait to see what you come up with for your proof."

He shrugged. He'd need to think of something fun. Get the older boys involved somehow. Make it a family project.

He pressed a firm, quick kiss against his wife's mouth, then said, "It makes me sad. John is our youngest. Our last to believe in Santa Claus. They're growing up, darlin'. Growing up way too fast."

"I know."

"I just love this part of our lives."

"Me, too," she agreed. "We went so long without being blessed with children and they've filled our world with joy."

“We’re within sniffing distance of the teenage years. I know those years will bring their own joys, but I’ll miss having little kids. I’ll miss having Santa Claus on Christmas morning.”

“I know. But growing up, growing old, is part of life. It’s okay to be a little bittersweet about what’s gone before, but there’s a better way to look at it. A way you and I especially should look at it.”

“What’s that?”

She cupped his face in her hands and smiled up at him, her gorgeous green eyes warm and loving as she said, “To quote John’s favorite philosopher Dr. Seuss: ‘Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.’”

Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.

As the echo of the Dr. Seuss quote rang in Branch’s head, the vision before him turned misty. “No!” he cried out, reaching for it, trying desperately to grab hold of it and preserve it, even as the images evaporated. Loss pierced his heart, the agonizing pain as fresh as it had been the day his precious Margaret died, fresh as the instant when he’d learned his John had been taken from him.

Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.

The white-leather-clad woman on the Gold Wing eyed him and said, “Well, Mr. Grinch? ‘What if Christmas, he thought, doesn’t come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.’”

His emotions churning, he shot her an angry glare. “Would you please keep your fiction straight? Is this Dr. Seuss or is it Charles Dickens?”

The blasted woman laughed aloud, gunned her engine, and in an instant, Branch found himself back astride her motorcycle. As they sped off down the street and across time, the echo of his wife’s words remained with him.

Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.

A heartbeat later, the scenery changed. Branch recognized the surroundings. They were out at Possum Kingdom Lake approaching the marina where Luke and Maddie kept their new cruiser, the Miss Behavin' III.

The world was back in order, with buildings, trees and everything the way he remembered them when he visited last August. The Miss Behavin' III floated in her slip and to his surprise, the cabin lights glowed. *Strange. Why would anyone be aboard this time of night, this time of year? It wasn't exactly boating weather. Fishing, either.* But when he looked closer, he saw the shadowy figure at the stern casting a line into the water.

"That's Luke," he said.

"Maddie is with him." Celeste switched off the engine and they both dismounted.

"The question is what are *we* doing here?"

"We're here to observe."

Branch took a step backward as another thought occurred to him. "My son sometimes uses his boat as a romantic get-away spot. I don't think we should intrude."

Celeste flashed another smile and again warmth washed through Branch. *Wow. That smile of hers is better than a shot of Kentucky sour mash.*

"Unfortunately for them, Luke and Maddie aren't indulging in love play tonight," Celeste said. "Come, Branch. Listen."

At that, Branch found himself seated on the deck railing aboard the Miss Behavin' III, Celeste Blessing perched beside him. Luke stood three feet away, but showed no sign of noticing that his old man had come to visit.

Okay, so maybe this *was* an *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey dream. "Are you sure your name isn't Clarence?" he asked Celeste.

Her laughter sounded like church bells. Luke didn't appear to hear that, either.

Maddie came out from the cabin carrying two glasses of red wine. She set one on the table beside Luke, then leaned against the railing and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

A wry smile touched Luke's lips as he let the fishing lure fly. "Christmas, when I was nine. It was so great, Red."

"Tell me about it."

Luke's grin turned wistful. He slowly cranked the fishing reel and pulled his line in. "John still believed in Santa. One of the neighborhood kids had told him Santa wasn't real, so Dad came up with this elaborate plan to prove to him that Santa existed, and he enlisted the rest of the family's help. Mom sewed a pair of Santa pants that were fancier than any costume you could buy in Brazos Bend and my dad tracked down the perfect pair of black boots. Matt manned the jingle bells and Mark and I manned the pulley. Christmas Eve—actually early Christmas morning—we woke John up and tiptoed downstairs and we caught ol' Kris Kringle going up the chimney. My mom and dad showed up on cue and Branch snapped a picture. John took it school and proved to the entire Kindergarten class that Santa really did exist."

"That's funny," Maddie said. "I can easily imagine Branch doing something like that."

"John was the hero of Fain Elementary—at least until the next year when that snotty Rhonda Wilson tricked her mother into spilling the beans in front of the cub scouts."

Maddie sipped her wine and sighed wistfully. "I'm jealous. We never had Santa Claus at our house, not even before my mother died. Savannah didn't believe in lying to children and Blade wouldn't tell her no for anything."

"You never had Santa? You never told me that before." Luke set down his fishing pole. He reached out, clasped her hand, and brought it to his mouth to press a kiss against her palm. "I'm sorry, Red. No wonder you've worked so hard to make Christmas special for our girls."

She shrugged. "I've worked to make Christmas special for all of us."

A touch of bitterness entered Luke's tone. "For all the good that will do us this year."

"Now, Luke."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm just so angry at Branch. There, I said it. My father is dying and I'm mad enough to spit nails at him. What does that make me?"

"Human?" his wife suggested and handed him his wine. "It's easy for you to be angry at your father. After all, you've had an inordinate amount of practice at it."

"Isn't that the truth?" Luke released a heavy sigh. "Dad has lost a lot. I'll give him that. I know how much it hurts because it hurts me, too. But good things have happened in his life these past few years. Don't they count? My brothers and I reconciled with Branch. He has daughters-in-law and grandchildren that adore him. Instead of focusing on who is missing, why can't he focus on who is here?"

"It's a disappointment, that's for sure."

On his invisible perch, Branch frowned.

"I should have called him on the whole cancel Christmas thing when he started it," Luke continued. "It was stupid and childish and little more than a temper tantrum. We tiptoed around it for too long because we knew what was behind it."

"He gave up on ever finding John."

Luke turned away from his wife and stared out over the lake, his posture stiff and forbidding. A long minute of silence dragged out and gave Branch the impression that they hadn't discussed John or his whereabouts in quite some time.

Finally, Luke said, "Yes, he lost faith that we'd ever find John."

Maddie set down her wine glass and stepped forward, wrapping her arms around her husband. “And what about you, Luke? Have you lost your faith, too?”

This time his silence lasted twice as long, but when he spoke, his voice rang with conviction. “No, I haven’t. It might be hanging on by a thread, but I have to believe that someday my little brother will come home. And you know what? That’s precisely why I thought it was so important to put up the Wonderland. It’s a Callahan family tradition. We didn’t have many of those after Mom died, but Branch did continue the Wonderland. He said it was a tribute to her because she loved it so much, and that he knew in his heart that she’d be looking down on it from heaven and smiling.”

“That’s lovely.”

“It stayed with me. All those years I was away from Brazos Bend, I found a certain comfort in knowing that every December, the front yard at Callahan House was alive with the spirit of Christmas.” He slowly shook his head. “Silly, isn’t it?”

“Not at all.”

A small wave rolled up to the Misbehavin’ III and splashed against the hull. The boat rocked gently. Luke inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled in a rush. “Must be all you can eat catfish night at Bass Hollow. Sure smells good.”

“Are you hungry? We still have two hours before I promised the babysitter we’d be back.”

“Nah. I couldn’t eat. Unless, you want some?”

“No.”

Luke lifted his gaze to the star-filled winter night. “You know, Maddie, if my father dies under these circumstances, we’ll never be able to put up the Wonderland display again. Not at Callahan House.”

“Why don’t we cross that bridge if and when we come to it.”

Continuing as if he had not heard her, he added, “Maybe we can donate it to the town. They can put it up at city hall or something next Christmas.”

“Stop it. Don’t jump the gun, honey. Next Christmas is a long time away. We have to get through this one first.”

“No kidding.”

Maddie hugged him hard, then rested her head against him, offering him her support. “Luke, you know it’s not your fault, right?”

He remained stubbornly silent.

She released him, took a step back, and punched him firmly in the kidneys. “Listen to me, Callahan. You are not responsible for Branch’s illness.”

“Ow.” He grimaced and turned around. “I know, Red. In my head I know, but in my heart . . .” He shrugged.

“If the worst happens—if we lose Branch, if you never find John—we’ll deal with it. Callahans are strong people. Your Christmas Wonderland will survive. Your traditions will survive. You won’t be like your father, Luke.”

“He lost his faith. He lost hope.”

“Yes.”

“But, dammit, he didn’t lose love! How does the Bible quote go? ‘There are three things that last forever: Faith, hope, and love; But the greatest of them is love.’ Why did he turn his back on that?”

“I don’t know that he turned his back on it,” Maddie replied. “I think he’s been blinded to it by his pain. Maybe it’s time that his pain came to an end.”

“I don’t want to lose him.”

“I know, baby. Neither do I. And who knows, maybe we won’t lose him. Maybe he’ll rally.”

“Maybe.” He turned and took her in his arms. “After all, this is Christmas, right? The season of miracles.”

“That’s right. I believe that miracles do happen.”

“Me, too.” As Luke dipped his head to kiss her, he murmured, “After all, I have you.”

In that instant, Branch found himself back astride the Gold Wing, breezing down the streets of Brazos Bend.

He rubbed his chest where his heart ached. The too-familiar sensation angered him, so he snapped into the motorcycle helmet’s microphone. “So what was that all about? The Ghosts of Christmas Present? Was it supposed to be some monumental lesson for me? Are you going to trade in your white leather for black and take me to see my grave next?”

“No, I don’t have time for that. Besides, Charles Dickens had it wrong. We don’t do it that way. Seeing the future would be cheating.”

Something in her voice gave him pause. “Just who are ‘we’?”

Celeste waved the question away. Suddenly, they were pulling into the highway rest stop on the road leading out of town. She braked to a stop, switched off the motor, climbed off the bike and removed her helmet. The serious look in her eyes put Branch on guard.

“I’ve shown you all I intend to show you, Branch Callahan. I hope you’ve recognized the lessons presented to you tonight. The question before us now is how you will choose to respond. You see, the time has come for you to make your choice.”

Warily, Branch asked, “What choice?”

“You have the chance to be part of your sons’ lives, part of the lives of their wives and children. Or . . .” She gestured toward the highway. “You can go.”

“Go?” Branch’s gaze went from her, to the highway, then back to her again. “Go where?”

“That’s not my place to say.”

His teeth tugged at his lower lip. “Do you mean that I get to choose between living and dying?”

“You’ve been choosing to die for some time now, haven’t you? Tonight is your last chance to change your mind. So what will it be, Branch Callahan? Are you going to stay around for awhile or are you ready to go?”

Part Three

Matt Callahan set his jaw and braced himself for bad news as he waited for the nurse to complete his father's examination. Branch's breathing was shallow, his complexion pale. He lay as still as death itself.

Lifting his gaze from his father's still form, Matt focused on the nurse, an older woman with lovely blue eyes and a soothing disposition. The tension inside him eased just a little. He couldn't put his finger on why or how, but something about Celeste Blessing simply made him and his brothers feel better.

For that alone he was glad that the kids had gone looking for a miracle and found Celeste Blessing. The fact that she'd given his former boss at the Agency, Jack Davenport, as a reference and he'd advised Matt to accept her help had made the decision to bring her into Callahan House to help a snap—even if she wasn't technically a nurse. She called herself a facilitator of healing. Jack had been more to the point: "She's a miracle worker, Matt. If she's willing to go to Brazos Bend, then you need to let her do it."

Matt watched as she straightened, removed the stethoscope from her ears, and tugged the covers back over Branch Callahan's shoulders. She gave his chest a little pat right over his heart. None

too gently, Matt observed. Was she trying to wake it up or something? Unable to remain silent a moment longer, he asked, “Well?”

She offered him a tender, compassionate smile. “I think the time has come for you to gather your family around, Matthew.”

“Oh.” He lifted his hand and rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll call them.”

Matt blew out a heavy breath, then exited his father’s bedroom and pulled the door shut behind him. The master suite had been added on to the back of Callahan House when stairs became too big a problem for Branch, and as Matt took two steps toward the main part of the house, it hit him. Branch Callahan was dying.

His world started spinning. As he reached for the wall to steady himself, a pair of loving arms wrapped around his waist and steadied him. “You okay, hon?” his wife asked.

“Yeah. No.” His arms closed around Torie; he closed his eyes and held her tight. His wife was no bigger than a minute, but she filled up the yawning hole inside him like nothing else. “Ah, babe. He’s dying. I thought I was prepared for this, but I’m not.”

“I know. I doubt anyone ever is.”

His throat grew tight and as pressure built behind his eyes. “She told me to call the family.”

Torie pulled herself out of his arms and took a step backward. She lifted her arms, took his face in her hands, and stared up at him with watery eyes. “You are a man of great strength, Matt Callahan, and you will get through this. *We* will get through this. Together, as a family.”

He swallowed hard. “I know. I just wish we had a little more time. I wish it wasn’t happening now, at Christmas. The kids. . . .”

“The kids will deal,” Torie responded. “After all, they’re Callahans.”

Arm in arm, Matt and Torie walked to the study where Matt tackled the difficult task of summoning his brothers to Callahan House for a death vigil.

#

Mark was making a diaper run to the drugstore when his cell phone rang. Spying his brother's number, knowing that Matt was on sickbed rotation at Callahan House, his stomach sank to his knees. This wouldn't be good news.

It wasn't.

He made a quick call to Annabelle. They decided she and the kids would meet him at Branch's. At the checkout, he handed his cash over with trembling fingers. Moments later, he climbed inside the cab of his pickup and realized his heart was pounding as if he'd just finished a ten-mile run.

Mark had been angry at Branch for more years than he could remember. He'd resented the way his father had broken up the family after his mother died, and he'd been furious about how Branch reacted when John was shot and kidnapped off the street in Sarajevo. They'd managed to reconcile in recent years but Mark had never been able to douse the last flickers of resentment in his heart.

He never would have guessed that his father's pending death would hit him this hard.

He said as much to Annabelle when she met him at the curb in front of Callahan House. She replied, "He's your father. You love him. Of course you hate the idea of losing him."

His gaze drifted over the Winter Wonderland displays as he considered the change his father's passing would have on his family and on Brazos Bend. Branch Callahan was an iconic figure. He'd fought in Korea and Vietnam, then came home to manage his hardscrabble ranch and bring up the oil that pooled beneath it. He'd made a fortune during the oil boom and managed not to lose it all when prices crashed. His wife made sure he tithed to their

church and supported worthy causes with his wealth. Recently when Mark took over managing Branch's finances, he discovered that his father had kept up his charity work through the years, even through the worst of times when Mom died and when John disappeared.

"For too long I focused on the fact that he wasn't perfect and made horribly stupid decisions. I couldn't recognize his pain because my own blinded me to it. As a result, I've wasted a lot of time with him. And now . . ." Mark's eyes settled on the display featuring the large brown boot of the widow who lived in a shoe rhyme. "Now I mourn that time, those years. I mourn what we could have . . . what we should have . . . had."

"I know." Sympathy and concern showed in Annabelle's big brown eyes. "Nothing is going to fill the hole Branch will leave in this family, but you and your brothers do have a treasure that should ease the pain when you're ready."

"What do you mean?"

"His letters. Those boxes and boxes of letters he wrote to each of you. He still writes them, you know. At least, he did before this illness."

"I've never looked at mine."

"I know. You haven't been ready. I think maybe, after this, you will be. Maddie told me Luke has read all of his. She said he said the experience is like having a one-on-one conversation with Branch."

"I dunno, Belle. That could be the ultimate frustration. At least now I can bark back at him when he barks at me."

"Hey, that doesn't have to stop. I cannot imagine Branch Callahan leaving the earthly plain entirely. Maybe God will assign guardian angel duties to him and he'll watch over Tanner or Emma."

Mark winced. "That's making one great big assumption."

“Your father is a poster child of repentance, Mark Callahan.” When he shrugged but said nothing more, she added, “I like to think that the good part of what’s happening now is that he’ll be reunited with his beloved Margaret Mary, his Meg.”

Without warning tears stung Mark’s eyes. “I know. And, maybe John, too.”

“Maybe John, too.”

Needing to change the subject before he broke down and bawled like a baby, Mark said, “What are the kids doing?”

“They’re in the home theater room watching Christmas DVDs. I called Chris and he’s on his way. He’s volunteered to take charge of the family little people today.”

Chris was Mark’s adult son by his late first wife. A year ago he had taken over management of the family ranch since neither Mark nor either of his brothers had wanted to step into the job. Branch was pleased beyond belief with it. His frequent comment concerning his eldest grandchild “The boy has cows in his blood” always sent the younger grandkids into giggling fits.”

“That’s good. The kids love him. Maybe Chris will find a way to keep Christmas from being ruined for the little guys.”

“We won’t let it be ruined,” Annabelle said. “Branch wouldn’t want that.”

“Then he needs to do his part and stretch this dying thing out. It’s Christmas Eve. He needs to give us thirty-six hours at least, preferably forty-eight.” With that, Mark grabbed the drugstore sack with diapers and baby wipes from the passenger seat of his truck, shut the door, and held hands with his wife as he walked toward an event he dreaded attending.

#

“Do I stay or do I go?” Branch Callahan repeated the question asked by the spirit who rode a Gold Wing and wore dangling earrings shaped like angels’ wings. He rubbed the back of his neck and said it again. “Stay or go.”

“Well?” Celeste asked. She pulled a pocket watch from her white leather jacket and holding it by its chain, swung it back and forth. “Tick tock. Tick tock. We don’t have all day, Callahan. I want to make it home for midnight services and I have quite some way to travel.”

Branch stood at a crossroads, literally. The way north looked bright, golden and inviting. South, well, he didn’t like that reddish glow to the air, and the octagonal road sign posted a few yards from the intersection made that part of the decision easy. White letters against red said: *Stop. Change your ways. You don’t want to travel down this road.*

Branch *really* didn’t want to travel south.

East had a roadblock standing in the road. Looking past it, he spied familiar items littering the roadside. *Young Johnny’s blue bike. Little Samantha’s baseball glove. Those had to be Torie’s red high heels.* As the shortest adult member of the Callahan clan, Matt’s Victoria endured her fair share of teasing about her lack of stature, and as a result, wore skyscraper heels on a regular basis. Yep, the way east looked cluttered and comfortable and . . . inaccessible. That left west and north.

Branch yearned for north. He truly did. But the way west stretched open, clean and welcoming. Ready for more. Ready for clutter.

He made up his mind and climbed onto the Honda Gold Wing making a sweeping gesture with his arm. “Go west, young woman.”

She smiled beatifically at him. “You made an excellent choice, Branch Callahan . . . as you will soon see.”

Celeste Blessing climbed onto the Gold Wing’s driver’s seat and started the engine. She gunned the motor and popped a wheely.

An instant later, Branch Callahan was back in bed, thirsty as a mud hen on a tin roof. He opened his eyes and glanced around

the room. He didn't see his celestial visitor, but three of his boys were here, along with their wives. Everyone's gaze was on Maddie, who was saying, ". . . my favorite Christmas. The gifts were over-the-top. Branch and my dad competed like sixteen-year-old boys to outdo each other. I made them both take back dozens of gifts."

Luke laughed softly. "It was an amazing thing to see: a rock star and a crusty oilman pouting like babies."

Branch's voice emerged in a croak. "I didn't pout like a baby. Blade is the one who got teary-eyed."

Six pairs of eyes whipped around to look at him.

Matt's jaw dropped. Luke's eyes rounded in shock. Mark closed his eyes, dragged a hand down his face, then looked again and said, "Dad?"

While their husbands stood gawking, the girls rushed forward. Torie helped Branch sit up. Maddie poured him a glass of water and Annabelle helped him sip it. Eventually, Luke emerged from his stupor and said, "Quick, somebody call the doctor."

"Hold on a minute," Branch said, more comfortable now that he'd managed to wet his whistle. "There's no rush for a sawbones. I chose to go west and I could see enough of the road to know that the trip will take a bit of time, yet."

"He's delirious," Matt said. "Where's Celeste?"

"She left," Torie said. "She said her work here was done, that we didn't need her anymore."

Branch glanced at the window and took note of the darkening sky. "Say, what time is it? After four? One of you needs to haul your butt downstairs and flip the switch for the Winter Wonderland."

"Oh, holy night," Maddie said.

Branch looked at his daughter-in-laws. "Are we going to the early service tonight or were you planning to take the kids to

midnight mass? If we're going to early service, I need to get moving. I feel like I haven't had a shower in a week."

"Sweet little baby in a manger," Annabelle breathed.

Torie laughed, "Well, Santa Claus, you are driving this sleigh, and it appears that Christmas has come early to Callahan House this year. I say we do whatever you want to do—as long as you let the doctor take a look at you first. Somebody call him."

"I don't believe this," Matt said. "They said you were dying. You hadn't had water in days."

"Which is why I'm still dry as Moses in the middle of the Red Sea." Branch smiled gently at his firstborn. "Look, Matthew, to quote a great philosopher, 'Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple.' That's the case here."

"Branch can quote a philosopher?" Luke murmured, amazement in his voice.

The women—all mothers of young children—replied, "Dr. Seuss."

"So what's the simple answer, Dad?" Mark asked.

Branch closed his eyes and savored the word he had not heard from Mark in forever. Dad. "The simple answer is faith, my children. You must have faith. You have to believe. Only then do real miracles happen."

#

Downstairs, just as Rudolph, Hermey, and Yukon Cornelius arrived at the Island of Misfit Toys, Chris Callahan heard the front doorbell ring. "I'll get it," Johnny said, scrambling to his feet. "This song drives me crazy."

Aware that this was a delicate time for the family, Chris rose and followed his young cousin. Dad and his brothers wouldn't want to entertain visitors right now. He'd play gatekeeper.

By the time he reached the entryway, Johnny had the door open. Chris heard a stranger ask, "Hello. I'm looking for the

Callahan family. Do they still live here? Since the Winter Wonderland is dark, I'm wondering . . . um."

"This is my Granddad Branch's house," Johnny said. "He still lives here, but he's sick. I'm Johnny Callahan. Who are you?"

"He's sick?" the stranger asked.

Chris stepped up to the doorway. He went to flip on the porch light but accidentally hit the switch that lit up the Wonderland. Staring past the stranger, he saw an SUV parked at the curb. More people were inside.

The visitor was staring at him, a faint smile on his lips. Chris frowned. "I'm sorry, Mister. This isn't a good time. My grandfather isn't doing well. In fact, he's dying and we don't—"

"Branch is dying?" The man stepped past Chris and into the hallway. "Where is he? Upstairs?"

"Hey, wait a minute, mister. You can't—"

"I can." Troubled green eyes fixed on Chris. "I have to. He's my father."

"Excuse me?" Chris asked, just as Maddie, Torie, and Annabelle entered the room, emotion he couldn't quite read shining in their eyes.

"I'm Gabe." The man winced, shook his head. "John. I'm John. John Gabriel Callahan. Where is my dad?"

#

For some weird reason, Luke Callahan was having a Grinch moment. He felt like his heart had grown three sizes in a single day. He was pretty sure that any minute he'd start bawling like a baby. He turned his head to blink away the tears and noticed that the Winter Wonderland was ablaze.

A soft knock sounded on the door, then a man stepped into the room. A stranger. But not a stranger.

The man's gaze zoomed in on Branch. Luke's stomach took a funny flop. *I knew it.* He heard the whisper-soft echo in his mind. *You kept the faith.*

#

Mark saw the stranger enter the room. At first he thought a new doctor must have arrived. Then he took a second look . . . and the world as he knew it ground to a halt. The flicker of emotion in his heart that had never quite died flared and a voice whispered in his ear. *You never lost hope.*

#

Matt took one look at the man and everything inside him froze. He blinked, then gasped as his heart swelled and overflowed, flushing his entire body with warmth and joy. A soft, but certain knowledge floated through his thoughts. *Love can work miracles.*

#

“You’re not dead,” said the man with unfamiliar features.

But he has his mother’s eyes.

Tears welled in Branch Callahan’s eyes and overflowed. “You’re not dead, either.”

John. His lost son. He’d come home. *Meg, do you see this? Our Johnny has come home!*

Branch’s heart lifted. “Praise the Lord, it’s a miracle. A Christmas miracle.” He clapped his hands in joy. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

Luke’s voice cracked as he asked, “John?”

At the same moment, Mark exclaimed, “John!”

Matt started to laugh. “It is you!”

But the stranger—John—still had a question that demanded an answer. He pointed toward the bed. “He’s not dying?”

Luke joined in Matt’s laughter and said, “Apparently not.”

“Shoot, you’re not getting off that easy,” Branch responded, his tone gruff but his grin as big as Texas. “C’mere, boy.”

John sat on the side of Branch’s bed and took his father’s hand. *A handshake?* Branch was having none of that. He threw his

arms around his youngest and hugged him hard. “Welcome home, son. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Dad. I’ve missed you.” Glancing up, he met each of his brothers’ gazes in turn. “I’ve missed you all.”

When Branch finally released John, Matt yanked him up and into a bear hug. Mark repeated the gesture, pounding his youngest brother’s back as he did so. Luke grabbed hold of his brother’s shoulders and shook him. “I cannot tell you how happy we are to see you, John-boy.”

John grinned and in that moment, Branch saw past the changes made by time (and he guessed, some plastic surgery) to the boy who had always been the heart of the Callahan clan. Tears fell from his eyes and he grabbed for a tissue from the box beside the table. As he swiped it across his cheek, movement outside caught his attention and he blinked. Hard. *Whoa. That whole thing was just a dream, wasn’t it?*

If he didn’t know better, he’d say he’d just seen an apparition in the sky. Not Santa and his sleigh, but a woman dressed in white riding a motorcycle.

His focus returned to his son when John replied, “Being home, seeing you again, is something I thought would never happen. I’ve traveled a long, long road to get here. This is an answer to a whole lot of prayer.”

At that point, Matt cleared his throat. “You know, I’m not one to spit in the face of a miracle, but John, about that long road? What happened to you? Where have you been?”

John drew a deep breath, then exhaled heavily, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s a long story and not a very pretty one at times. It’s certainly not a story for Christmas Eve when I have family downstairs to meet and my own personal miracle waiting out in the car.

“Let’s see to Christmas and give thanks for our blessings, shall we? Then tomorrow, I’ll tell you about the most wondrous place in the world, a little piece of heaven called Eternity Springs.

*Geralyn Dawson/Emily March invites you to experience
John's journey of hope, healing, and happiness in:*

ANGEL'S REST

by

Emily March

Coming from Ballantine Books

On sale February 15th, 2011

Pre-Order Now!

www.EmilyMarch.com

ISBN 987-0-345-51834-7

Author's Note

For those of you unfamiliar with the Callahan clan, you can read more of the Callahan brothers in Geralyn Dawson's novels Give Him the Slip, Never Say Never, and Always Look Twice.

Angel's Rest by Emily March both finishes out the Callahan series and begins my new Eternity Springs series. I needed to write John's story, and I knew readers wanted to read it, too. I'm grateful to my new publisher, Ballantine Books, for giving me the freedom to bring that bit of the old into my new world.

Angel's Rest will be released in paperback, e-book, and audiobook format on February 15, 2011. It will be followed by Hummingbird Lake on March 22, 2011, and Heartache Falls on April 26, 2011. Two more Eternity Springs novels are currently in the works.

I hope you'll join me in Eternity Springs. It's a little piece of heaven in the Colorado Rockies.

*Emily March
December 2010*