

***Happiness Key* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

The old man still wasn't answering.

Tracy Deloche made a fist and banged the border of Herb Krause's screen door, wincing when a splinter won the round.

Flipping her fist she dug out the offending sliver with nails that were seriously in need of the attentions of her favorite manicurist. Unfortunately sweet natured Hong Hanh was more than two thousand miles away filing and polishing for outrageous tips at the Beverly Wilshire hotel, while Tracy banged and shouted and tried to collect Herbert Krause's measly rent payment, so she could put something in her refrigerator and gas tank.

"Mr. Krause, are you there?" she shouted.

"Well, what's up with that?" she muttered when nobody answered. She could see his ancient Dodge sedan parked behind the house. She was sure her timing had been perfect. Apparently she was as good at collecting money as she was at everything else these days.

Tracy flopped down on a wooden bench beside three carefully arranged orchids in clay pots. Something green and slimy flashed past her and vanished in the Spanish moss mulch. Florida was like that, teeming with things that darted at you day and night, some with more scrawny legs than a bucket of fast food chicken.

Happiness Key. She almost laughed.

CJ, her ex-husband, was responsible for the name of the "development" where Herb's cottage and four others stood. In a rare stab at poetry, CJ had called this hole the yin and yang of Florida. On one side white sand beaches with tall palms swaying in a gentle tropical breeze, on the other, Florida's wildest natural beauty. Mangroves and alligators, exotic migratory birds, and marshes alive with Mother Nature's sweetest music. Who couldn't find happiness here? Particularly CJ, who had expected to expand his considerable fortune wiping out most of it when he developed the land into a marina and upscale condo complex for Florida's snow birds.

From the side of Herb's cottage Tracy heard an air-conditioner grinding, and the sound made her teeth hurt. Visiting him was like summering in Antarctica. How long before the ancient window unit ended up in the Sun County landfill, and she was down hundreds of dollars for a replacement? Herb was older than the mangroves that blocked access to the bay, older than the burial mounds at the far end of Palmetto Grove Key where Florida's first residents had dumped their dead. No surprise his internal temperature control was out of whack. Tracy was just glad the old man paid his own

electric bill. Evicting one of the state's senior citizens to save a few bucks would get her just the kind of publicity she didn't need.

She'd already had enough of that in California.

Leaning back against the concrete block wall of the cottage she folded her arms and closed her eyes. Since rolling out of bed that morning she hadn't looked at a clock, but she supposed it was almost nine.

The air was beginning to sizzle. May on Florida's Gulf Coast might as well be full summer. Of course she hadn't yet lived here in full summer, so maybe June was going to be that much worse, maybe June was going to be unbearable. But considering how unbearable her whole life had become since her divorce from CJ, what were a few degrees here and there? Let the humidity condense into something thick enough to eat with a spoon. What did she care? She would take it and make something of it.

That was her new mantra. And she hadn't paid some West Coast guru or his slavish followers to find it for her. She'd found it all by herself. For free.

A door creaked nearby, and for a moment she thought maybe Herb Krause had found his way across the frozen tundra of his living room. Then she heard what sounded like a broom moving back and forth over concrete. She opened her eyes and leaned forward to see Herb's neighbor, Alice Brooks, garbed in a voluminous red and white house coat, sweeping her doorstep. It wasn't the first time. Tracy paid as little attention to her renters as she absolutely had to, but even she hadn't failed to notice Alice outside with her broom morning, noon and night.

If her life ever came down to primly snapped house coats and a stoop clean enough for surgery, she would wade into the Gulf until the water was over her head. Then she'd simply make herself at home on the bottom and expire.

Alice looked up from her stoop, and her eye's met Tracy's. She seemed puzzled to find her landlady sitting across the lawn on Herb's bench. For a moment she gazed around in confusion.

Tracy pushed herself to her feet and strolled the wide expanse that separated the cottages. Alice was next on her list anyway, and since Herb was either avoiding her or out for the morning, she might as well move on. Somebody had to pay rent today, or Tracy's checking account was going to be as naked as a Paris Hilton video.

"Good morning, Alice," she said, as she covered the distance. She smiled, although the effort seemed to bead, like perspiration, in the resulting creases. "Never a moment's rest, huh?"

"Sand. And trees." Alice shook her head.

"Uh huh." Tracy wasn't quite sure what was up with Alice, who always seemed the slightest bit off kilter. "Well, I just thought I'd pick up everybody's rent checks before the sun gets higher."

Alice nodded, her wide forehead crinkling in confusion. "Today?"

"Right. May 15th. Rent day. Remember, I said it would be easier if everybody paid on the same day?"

Alice nodded, but she still looked confused. She wore wire-rimmed glasses that were the silvery gray of her hair, and little button pearl earrings with old-fashioned screws to hold them in place. Deep lines fanned out from her nose to the corners of her mouth, which always drooped and today looked sadder still. Tracy had a feeling the past years hadn't been filled with happy moments for Alice.

Welcome to the club.

A voice rang out from the house, what sounded like a child's, maybe a girl's from the high pitch. She had already noted a newish Saab in the driveway beside Alice's ten year old Hyundai.

"I'm sorry," Tracy said. "Sounds like you have company. I could come back in a little while if that's better."

"Company?"

"Somebody in your house." Tracy pointed to Alice's screen door. Alice's cottage, like all the others in the little development, was a cinderblock shoebox with a shabby shingle roof. The outside of Alice's was painted a soft yellow, the shutters and doors a bright coral, the sashes and window grills a deep sea green. For decoration, three turquoise seahorses descended the wall at a forty-five degree angle. Tracy thought they might be trying to escape.

Alice glanced behind her. "Granddaughter. My son-in-law. Come to live."

Tracy was surprised. "Here? With you?"

A girl with long hair, most likely the aforementioned grandchild, came to the door and flattened her face against the screen. "Hi. Do you have any kids?" she asked hopefully, lips against wire.

Tracy tried to remember the terms of Alice's lease. Could renters really invite anybody to come and share these cottages without her permission? With vast plans for the property, the paper trail had been thin when CJ rented them out. With thirty days notice rentals could be terminated by either party, and all repairs were at the discretion of the owner—that being Tracy now, since good old CJ was engrossed in landlord problems all his own.

The little girl's face was distorted by the screen, an old fashioned wire affair that was rusting in places. It was hard to tell how old she was, or anything else about her through the mesh, but Tracy guessed she wasn't yet an adolescent. Before Tracy could answer, a man's voice rumbled from the back of the house.

"Olivia. . ."

"Do you?" the girl repeated in a softer voice. "Somebody to play with?"

Tracy imagined what her life would be like now if she and CJ had added a child to their personal equation.

"Not a one," she said with real gratitude. "Sorry. Not even a parakeet."

"Olivia. . ." The man's voice sounded friendly enough, but his reminder did the trick.

Olivia backed away, becoming a three dimensional figure. Then she disappeared into the house.

"Lee writes them," Alice said.

Tracy turned back to her. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Checks. Lee writes them."

"Your son-in-law?"

Alice looked grateful Tracy understood. "He will."

"Great. Would you like to ask him to do it now? While I'm waiting I'll just try Herb again. His car's there, but when I knocked earlier he didn't answer ."

"Haven't seen him."

Tracy filed that away. Was Herb gone, or moved out? Without paying.

"Lee takes care of . . . things," Alice continued.

Tracy supposed Alice's living arrangements didn't really matter, as long as she paid her rent on time and vacated once she was asked to. For now Tracy needed to stay on her good side, so she manufactured another smile.

"I'm glad you have family to help. That's important."

Alice wasn't quite a shuffler, but she did drag her slipper-clad feet as she started back inside the house. Before she closed the door, Tracy saw her cast a longing glance at the broom.

As she started back to Herb Krause's cottage Tracy had to admit that in a pinch having family was important. She knew that from experience, because for all practical purposes she had no one. She was newly divorced, abandoned by parents and the majority of her friends. To add insult to injury she had been transported to a mosquito ridden swamp and forced to grovel for money to buy groceries.

At least CJ, who was probably sunning himself in the prison yard at Victorville, knew where his next meal was coming from. So what if he breakfasted on powdered eggs, stale toast and watery coffee? No matter what other trouble he ran into in the next twenty years, at least the Feds would make sure his stomach was never empty.

That was something, at least. She hoped CJ was learning to count his blessings. In the decades ahead he would need to focus on every single □ □ one.

"Well, here she comes."

Wanda Gray set *The Pirate's Bride* beside her on the lounge chair under the jacaranda tree in her front yard and watched the new landlady trudging up the dirt road toward her cottage.

"Kenny. . ." She aimed her voice toward the screen door and her husband. "It's that Deloche woman, come for her check. Don't you interfere now. I'm going to handle this."

She thought she heard a grunt, but she wasn't sure. A grunt was as much as she got out of Ken these days. She was sorry she hadn't circled the date of their last conversation on the calendar. No matter. A calendar that old had already been recycled into cheap napkins or some of that nasty looking stationary no normal person ever wrote a letter on.

□ "Don't trouble yourself none," she said under her breath. "Why would you start now, seeing as you haven't done a blessed thing around the house since Pluto was a pup?" She probably should have circled that date, too.

She had no intention of standing to greet the Deloche woman. She took off her glasses and set them next to her book before she smoothed her sundress over pudgy knees. One hand went to her lacquered red curls, the roots freshly tinted with her favorite copper shimmer. But that was as much primping as she was going to do. So what if Tracy Deloche was as skinny as one of those girls on *Sex in the City*? Wanda Gray was no second fiddle, not even at fifty-six.

What exactly did the young woman have to be snooty about, anyway? Sure, she owned this twenty-five acre spit of land on Palmetto Grove Key, across the bay from the town of Palmetto Grove, and it was probably worth millions. But exactly what good was it doing her? Ms. Deloche was what they called land poor, and it served her right for calling a

dump like this Happiness Key and thinking that everybody and his Uncle Jack would come flocking, just because she did.

From what Wanda could tell, the Deloche woman was going to have one heck of a time getting rid of the place. What with the economy the way it was in Florida, plus all those people at Wild Florida screaming because the Army Corps of Engineers had given Ms. Deloche's ex a permit for development, then running the whole thing through the courts. Add the folks who wanted to save every inch of the mangroves, and the ones who thought increasing traffic and widening the road would damage that old Indian mound. Ms. Deloche had one fine mess on her hands, and right now Wanda aimed to add to it.

With enthusiasm.

Today the landlady was dressed in baggy black capris and a matching bikini top with a gauzy white shirt exposing everything but her shoulders and arms. Her midriff, chest and neck were taut and tan; her dark brown hair fell straight as an arrow on its way to her shoulders. She had one of those smiles money could buy and the kind of unlined skin that was best slathered with sunblock. Wanda hoped she wasn't thinking that far ahead. A line or two would serve her right.

By the time Tracy finally arrived Wanda was waiting, fingertips steepled, like she had all the time in the world.

"Hi Wanda," Tracy said, flashing ten thousand dollar teeth. "You look cool and comfortable."

Wanda wasn't fooled. Tracy Deloche wouldn't notice if Wanda was writhing in the final throes of a coral snake bite.

"You look cool and comfy yourself." Wanda lifted a brow. "What with you wearing a bathing suit and all."

"Trust me, this top's never seen the water. It would fall apart."

"Now isn't that something? A bathing suit you can't get wet. What'll they think of next?"

Tracy smiled, as if to say the time for chit chat had expired. "I won't keep you from your book." Her gaze flashed down to the cover of Wanda's favorite paperback, then back up again, but she didn't quite conquer a smirk. "I was just stopping by to pick up your rent check."

"I thought maybe that's why you'd come." Wanda didn't move. "Then it's ready?"

"Nope. Not ready at all, seeing as I got a list of things that got to be done before you get even one penny." Wanda watched with pleasure as Tracy's smirk faded. The second it was gone she dove in for the kill.

"And before you remind me our lease—if that's what you want to call that scrap of paper Kenny signed—says you don't have to do a thing on the place, I'll just tell you I had a chat with some folks over at the courthouse this week and told them all the things that were wrong here."

Wanda paused just long enough to let that sink in. "Of course, I didn't tell them exactly where I lived. Not yet. But they were talking about condemning this shack if half the things I said were true. So I figure that you being a smart woman and well educated, you'll agree that making a few repairs now and keeping the renters you have will serve a lot better than going through all that rigamarole before you can find new ones."

Tracy was silent. Wanda wondered if she was trying to keep her temper .

"You want that list?" Wanda asked at last.

"Did you ever consider just telling me the problems and seeing if we could resolve them?"

"Honey, people like you don't ask people like me to sign a stinking old lease unless you're planning to hold it over our heads."

"Honey. . ." Tracy's eyes narrowed, and the word came out more like boiling cane syrup. "People like me know that people like you happen to be married to a cop. So even if I was a slumlord, which wasn't ever one of those things I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd have thought twice about ignoring real problems here."

Wanda glanced down at her hot pink nails, noting the tiniest chip on the polish of one.

She supposed the chip was due to that platter of grouper she'd carried to table six yesterday. She had known better than to carry all that grouper in one attempt, without a free hand for emergencies, like the swinging door that had raked her fingertips.

She looked up again. "You want the list? I got it right here. Course all you really have to do is look around a little. I'd have guessed you'd do that before now, on account of my Ken being that cop you were talking about."

"Give me a break, okay? I've been here just two weeks. I've spent the whole time mucking out that hovel I'm living in. I haven't exactly had time for house inspections." "Nope, you been hoping we'd just take that lease at face value. Don't go pretending it's not so."

Wanda lifted an envelope from under her book and held it out.

"Stove's throwing out so much gas both those crotons outside my kitchen window keeled over. Roof's leaking in the bathroom. Toilet's got more rust than a battleship. And if I wanted pets, I'd get me a kitty cat, not some flock of palmetto bugs. I already paid for an

exterminator and somebody to patch up some of the biggest holes where they were getting in. You can take that off my rent."

"Gosh, no travertine tile? No granite counters?"

Wanda put the envelope on top of her book when Tracy didn't take it. "You just go ahead and be sarcastic. But you think about it. We're not going anywhere while you do. You have any idea how hard it is to evict somebody these days? Especially when the sheriff happens to be friends with a certain member of the Palmetto Grove police force?"

Tracy leaned over and snatched the envelope. "I'll do what I can, but don't expect miracles."

Wanda watched her stalk down the road toward the cottage where those folks from India had taken up residence. Wanda didn't try to stop her, even though she knew they weren't at home because she had seen them leave an hour ago. At least if the landlady ever found them, the dark-skinned young couple at the end of the road spoke English. Wanda had to give them that much. That was one thing about Indians. They usually came knowing English and had good manners. But their presence some fifty yards away was just another sign that this place where Ken had settled her was a world filled with strangers. It was never going to feel like home.

"Happiness Key, my eyelash."

Morosely she watched Tracy Deloche's tight little butt swing in a determined rhythm until the young woman was finally out of sight. She didn't even yell inside to tell Ken she'd taken care of the problems. Wanda knew what a waste of time sounded like.