

***Season of Miracles* by Emilie Richards**  
**Excerpt**

*Chapter One*

The first thing she noticed was the silence, hovering in the morning air like a patient vulture waiting for his prey to cease its struggles. Elise had never realized that silence, something she had experienced little of in her thirty-five years, could be so foreboding.

Forcing herself awake she sat up in bed, pushing long strands of black hair away from her face with the palms of her hands. She listened carefully, but the silence remained unbroken. Through sleep-swollen eyes she gauged the time. There was no clock in her bedroom. Sleeping late had been one of the problems Elise had never had to worry about.

The August sunlight beating relentlessly through her window told her that the morning was at least half gone. *Why? Is Mama sleeping late too?*

The question triggered its own answer as she became more fully awake. *Mama*. No, *Mama* would sleep forever. Elise waited for the familiar sadness, but this morning she could detect no signs of it. Her mother was gone; Jeanette Ramsey's death was unalterable. Elise Ramsey was alive, possibly for the first time in seventeen years.

And the house was silent.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed she stood, her long cotton gown falling in snowy swirls around her bare feet. Parting the curtains she peered out the window at the sun-dappled avenue. The town of Miracle Springs was awake, going about its business with slow-moving enthusiasm. She stood there for long minutes counting cars. One...two... Satisfied that by sleeping late she had missed absolutely nothing, she turned and began to search her closet for the coolest dress she owned. The day was going to be a scorcher..

The dress she chose was one her mother had never liked—not that it had been easy to please Jeanette Ramsey, anyway. But this particular dress had elicited comments about gypsies and dressing to suit one's age and position in the community. It was white with a full embroidered skirt in a style that was never quite in or out of fashion, and Elise felt young again when she wore it. She realized that in her mother's eyes, that had been the whole problem.

Elise fastened the dress and pulled a brush through her long hair, twisting it into a cool knot on top of her head, and wondered fleetingly how much longer she'd be able to get away with the severe hairstyle that did nothing to soften the inevitable signs of approaching middle age. She wasn't much

of a judge, never having wasted time examining her appearance for innovative ways of dealing with flaws. Elise had worn her hair long since she was a child. She loved it. Glossy, still black and utterly unstylish, it was part of her image of herself. If it emphasized features that were less than perfect, it also emphasized the high cheekbones and smooth olive skin that she liked to think were her best assets.

As she wandered the room her movements disturbed the intimidating silence and shaped it to suit her. Now that she was wide awake Elise wondered why something she had longed for all her life—freedom, a chance to think her own thoughts—had seemed so threatening this morning. Undoubtedly, living alone was going to take some getting used to.

"But you will get used to it," she said out loud, "because you're probably going to spend the rest of your life alone." It wasn't a new thought or a particularly sad one. It was something she was just beginning to come to terms with, and like a child reciting a Bible verse, she spoke the thought as often as possible to commit it to memory.

Downstairs, she stopped to throw open the heavy draperies in the living room before moving on to the kitchen to fix her breakfast. The old frame house was already beginning to soak up the day's sunshine. August in central Florida was as predictable as anything in life. The weather was invariably hot and humid, guaranteed to slow the average person's pace by fifty percent. Most of the inhabitants of Miracle Springs cut their losses by air-conditioning their houses and places of employment.

Elise's house had one small air conditioner in the room that had belonged to her mother. The rest of the house had been left to the ravages of the Florida summer. Now Elise turned on a circular fan that was sitting on top of the kitchen counter and began to slice a grapefruit. She hummed as she worked, keeping the silence at arm's length with her own music.

This day would pass, and with it, the other sultry days of August. September would come, and with its arrival her life would once again be filled with the noise and confusion of teaching tenth grade English at Miracle Springs High. Elise, who had spent most of her life wishing for silence, put down her grapefruit knife and picked up a pen. As she slashed an X through the date on the calendar above the counter, she wondered why that simple act gave her so much satisfaction.

\*\*\*

"So after all those years of faking illness, Mrs. Ramsey just up and died last month. Just like that. Nobody even knew she was really sick. She complained so much all the time Dr. Mooney didn't do more than give her a quick check. Next thing anybody knew, she keeled over in his parking lot.

Gone in a minute."

Sloane Tyson sat in his aunt's living room and twisted the brim of his panama hat. The malleable straw crackled and popped as he ruined the shape forever. "So what happened to Elise after her mother died?" he asked, his voice a shade more enthusiastic than mere politeness dictated.

"Oh, she's still here. She'll be teaching again this year, I suspect. Best teacher at Miracle Springs High. Prettiest, too." Lillian Tyson looked at her nephew with interest. "Weren't you sweet on her years ago?"

Sloane had forgotten how every detail of life in a small town was collected and stored in the minds of its inhabitants. The system was more efficient than a computer bank and only slightly more personal. Today he had sat quietly and listened to his aunt's recital of the intimate details of the lives of Miracle Springs citizens, not expecting himself to be drawn into the conversation. He should have known better. He should have realized that Elise Ramsey would be on Lillian Tyson's list.

"You remember farther back than I do," he said nonchalantly. But of course, that wasn't true.

He'd forgotten a lot about Miracle Springs, put it out of his mind as if he'd never lived there, but he'd never forgotten Elise. No, he'd never forgotten Elise.

Lillian would not be daunted. "Well, it seems to me that you went steady with her your senior year."

"That was seventeen years ago."

"Around here, nothing much happens in seventeen years."

Sloane smiled wryly. His aunt was right, and it was precisely the reason he had left the small town of three thousand where he'd been born. He'd left at the first opportunity and never come back—except once, for his mother's funeral.

Lillian Tyson seemed to read his mind. "Are you going to make it, Sloane? Can you stand living here a year?"

"My choices are limited." Sloane stood and began to pace the small living room that was crowded with old furniture and assorted knickknacks. He was a large man, and he dwarfed his surroundings as well as the old woman who fondly watched his pacing.

"You're like a tiger in a cage," she pronounced, proud of her analogy. "Always have been. Miracle Springs hems you in."

And it was precisely that "hemming in" that had brought him back. For the first time he was in need of the sheltering influences of the little town, its slow, easy pace, its acceptance of its own. The

last thought made him pause. "Do you think they're going to accept Clay?" he asked.

As Lillian watched her nephew her unflinching cheerful expression didn't change. She didn't have to ask who "they" were. She knew Sloane referred to the citizens of Miracle Springs. "He's your son, isn't he? He's a Tyson. He may have some trouble, but he'll make it here."

"He wouldn't have made it in Cambridge," Sloane said to himself as much as to his aunt. "The kids there would have eaten him alive."

"They may try that here, but he'll be protected."

"I guess that's a start."

The living-room door swung open and a slender young man entered the room, his hands jammed in the pockets of stiff new blue jeans. "I fed your cats, Lillian," he said.

"Aunt Lillian," his father corrected him sharply.

"It's all right," Lillian said, waving aside Sloane's protest. "Clay doesn't know me from Adam. I don't seem like an aunt to him yet."

"He's still got to learn the proper forms of address," Sloane said, his hat brim crackling anew in his hands.

"Aunt Lillian," Clay said pleasantly, stressing the first word. "All this relative stuff seems strange."

"I suspect everything seems strange," Lillian said, a smile directed at her great-nephew. "But you don't seem strange to us. You're the spitting image of your daddy there. Right down to the way your hair swirls off your forehead."

Clay nodded, glancing at his father to see what impact his aunt's comment had made on Sloane. With an insight far beyond his years, Clay probably suspected that their resemblance was not a source of pleasure to his father.

"Resembles you right down to the ponytail," Lillian said, this time to Sloane.

"Sloane had a ponytail?" Clay asked.

"Nothing like yours," Lillian said, reaching out to tug the brown hair that fell in restrained waves to the middle of Clay's back. "When your dad was growing up around here, nobody'd even seen long hair on a man. Your dad's was short, barely long enough to put in a rubber band, but I'll tell you, it caused a stir in this town you wouldn't believe."

"What happened, Sloane?" Clay turned to his father and monitored his expression again.

"My uncle hauled me off to the barber shop. He was bigger than I was." The ghost of a grin lit

Sloane's face.

Clay seemed encouraged. "Are you planning to repeat history?"

"I'm not going to force you to do anything, Clay. It's your hair. I have no opinions about it one way or the other."

"Well I do," Lillian said firmly. "You want to fit in at Miracle Springs High, you get that hair cut before you go the first day. Kids'll like you better if you look like them."

Clay looked as if he was considering her words. "Why would they want me to look like them?" he asked finally. "That doesn't make any sense."

Lillian's jaw dropped a little, and Sloane shook his head. "You've got a lot to learn about teenagers, Clay," he said.

Clay shrugged. "I haven't even *seen* any teenagers here."

"Hasn't he been to the springs?" Lillian asked Sloane.

"I've been too busy settling in to take him."

"He can go by himself. He's fifteen. This isn't Boston. Fifteen's old enough to go anywhere around here. Do you have a swimsuit?" she asked Clay. At his nod she added, "Do you want to go?"

Clay nodded again.

"Then go home and put it on. You can swim while your dad takes care of business this afternoon. I'll walk you down to show you the way."

Sloane waited until Clay was gone. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"He's got to start somewhere." Lillian's frown matched Sloane's. "It's not like Clay's got something seriously wrong with him. He's going to be fine."

"He's got such a long way to go before he understands what this crazy world is all about. I feel like I'm throwing him to the lions."

"All parents feel that way," Lillian said.

"But not all parents are suddenly raising a son they didn't even know existed," Sloane said bitterly. "Not all parents have a son who didn't even know he had a last name until a month ago."

"And not all parents in that situation would care," Lillian reminded him.

"I never wanted to be a father."

"Give yourself time. Give Clay time. Give Miracle Springs time."

"Miracle Springs will have to bring me a miracle. I'm afraid that's what it's going to take."

"It's happened before." Lillian stood too and set her frail hand on her nephew's shoulder. "The

first miracle was finding Clay; the second one will be *really* finding him."

Sloane relaxed a little under her touch. "I appreciate your optimism."

"I appreciate your coming back here. I may be a selfish old lady, but I'm glad you're home. Even if it's just for a year. You were always more like a son than a nephew."

"By the time we leave, you may be glad to see us go."

"Not likely."

Sloane put his arms around his aunt and hugged her much as he had as a young boy. There were some things that time and distance and endless mistakes never changed. Sloane knew that his aunt's love was one of them.

Lillian's eyes were filled with tears when the embrace ended. "Don't go getting all soft on me, boy." She stepped back to search Sloane's face. "You know, as much as you dislike this town, you might find some things here for yourself this year."

"Such as?"

"Such as a mother for Clay."

Elise's name lay unspoken between them.

Sloane shook his head, his features fixed in decisive lines. "Clay will have to do with one parent. But then, that's more than he's ever had before."

"Just give this year a chance," Lillian said softly. "Let time take care of the rest."

But Sloane, who had never believed that time took care of anything, was lost in his own thoughts.

\*\*\*

As Elise strolled under the succession of canvas and fiberglass awnings that were strung over Hope Avenue's sidewalks she wondered if she would live long enough to see any changes in Miracle Springs. The only real miracle the town had to offer was the way it had avoided entry into this century. Even if changes occurred, they were so subtle they were invisible to the human eye.

The monotony was like an opiate to creativity and growth. Predictability was a potent drug that lulled Miracle Springs residents into accepting the inevitability of their lives.

*"This town'll kill you, Elise. It'll sneak up and change you until you don't know you're different from everybody else. And you'll die not remembering."*

Elise stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and wondered at the voice she had just heard. She wasn't going crazy. There was no doubt where the voice had come from. It was in her memory, locked tightly there for safekeeping. It was Sloane's voice, and the words were some of the last he had ever

spoken to her. She hadn't let herself think about that conversation for years.

She shook her head, not to banish the voice, but in distress at her own vulnerability. Seventeen years had passed and Sloane was still with her.

"Morning, Elise."

Elise looked up to see Olin Biggs, Miracle Springs mayor, bearing down on her. "Good morning, Olin."

"Hotter than Hades today. Same as yesterday. Probably the same tomorrow."

Funny. Those had been her thoughts exactly, only she hadn't been thinking about the weather. "It is hot," she agreed politely. "How's Sally?"

"She's doing fine. I think she's actually looking forward to school starting. You wouldn't consider moving up to eleventh grade English, would you? I know she'd like to have you as her teacher again."

Elise shook her head regretfully. "I can't do it. But tell her to come by and see me. She was a wonderful student."

Elise fielded Olin's condolences about her mother's death and walked on. By the time she reached the post office, she had encountered two former students and one more parent. The students were now gainfully employed residents of Miracle Springs with families of their own. Again Elise felt middle-age settling over her. All she needed was a cat and a few gray hairs, and she'd be the stereotypical old maid schoolteacher. If she wasn't already.

She was sorting through her small collection of bills and advertisements when she heard a familiar voice behind her. "Elise. What a nice surprise."

Her smile as she turned was hopeful. "Hello, Bob. Is Amy with you?"

Bob Cargil shook his head, displacing the hair that was carefully combed to cover the widening bald spot at the center of his scalp. "No, she's at the springs. You look lovely this morning."

"Thank you." Elise smiled again. It was nice to have someone notice what she looked like. "You look like you're feeling fit this morning."

"I can't really complain."

Somewhere inside her a voice proclaimed that if Bob couldn't really complain, it was the first time such a thing had happened. She squelched it with stern self-control. "How's the book coming?"

Bob shrugged. He was a history teacher at Miracle Springs High School and for the past five years had been working on a textbook for high school classes in Florida history. He had been stuck

for the past four. "It's hard to work in this heat." he said.

"I'm sure," Elise commiserated. The same rebellious voice reminded her that Bob's entire house was air-conditioned.

"Is our date still on for tonight?"

"I'm counting on it," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Then her voice brightened a little. "Is Amy coming?" Amy was Bob's fifteen-year-old daughter and Elise's biggest reason for tolerating Bob's presence in her life.

"No. This one's just us."

"Tell her to stop by for a visit."

"You know she will. She's always pestering me to let her come see you. But I know..." Bob's voice trailed off.

"Bob, I've told you, I'm not in mourning. "

"I'll tell her."

"Good." Elise reached out and squeezed his hand. "I'll see you tonight." She watched his retreat. Bob had recently developed a peculiar shuffling gait, as if he were practicing for the old age that was still a safe distance away. Although he was ten years Elise's senior, there was nothing wrong with his health that exercise and diet couldn't cure. Unfortunately Bob enjoyed the aging process and everything that went with it. Not for the first time Elise thought of the similarities between Bob and her mother, and suppressed a shudder.

The chimes in the town hall tower announced that it was eleven o'clock. Elise knew that meant it was actually 11:06. The tower chimes had been six minutes off as long as anyone could remember. No one had bothered to fix them, and now if anyone suggested it, the town fathers pointed out that fixing the chimes would only confuse people. It was better they reasoned, to leave them alone.

The prospect of a long hot afternoon stretched in front of her, and on the spur of the moment, she decided not to spend it at home. Nothing awaited her there except silence, unrelenting heat and a few unnecessary household chores. For the first time in her life she was really free to explore other options, and although there weren't many to explore in Miracle Springs, there were a few. She stopped at the drugstore, bought a turkey sandwich to go and took a shortcut down Faith Street toward the source of the town's name.

There was no silence at the springs. Crowds of teenagers with radios littered the sandy brown beach. The dock stretching from the beach out over the water was covered with glistening, oiled bodies,

and underneath it small children darted in and out between the piers that had been sunk deeply into the sand. Benches enameled a forest green sat in the shade of palm trees and moss-draped live oaks at the beach's edge, and Elise settled herself on one to enjoy the clamor.

She wasn't alone for long. Former and soon-to-be students dropped by to say hello. She had known most of them since they were small children. Some were the sons and daughters of her own high school friends; others she had met at church or in her volunteer work teaching reading at the tiny Miracle Springs library. Elise was as certain of her popularity with the town's young people as she was about anything in her predictable life.

A petite teenage girl with a cap of curly blond hair waved and then came to stand in front of her. "Hi, Elise. I've never seen you here before."

Elise patted the bench, and the girl sprawled beside her, spreading sand in her wake. "Amy, where've you been all summer? I've missed you."

"Here mostly." Amy's expression grew serious. "Dad said you wouldn't feel like visitors. Because of your mom. But I've been wanting to come and see you. He was wrong, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was." Elise put her arm around the girl's shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "But he was thinking of me so we won't be mad at him."

"Like I said at the funeral, I'm sorry about Mrs. Ramsey."

"Thank you." Elise smiled. "Now tell me what you've been doing."

They gossiped for a while, and then Elise watched as Amy was pulled away by boisterous friends. It was only as she finished her sandwich and settled back to watch the teenagers' antics that Elise noticed the boy standing underneath a nearby tree.

She had heard Sloane's voice in the middle of a nearly deserted sidewalk. Now she was seeing his image, and it was just as clear. She resisted the desire to squeeze her eyes shut. The voice had been a product of her memory. The image wasn't. And this obviously couldn't be Sloane himself.

She watched with fascination as the boy turned slightly, giving her a better view of his profile. She drew in a quick breath. He had Sloane's wide forehead, and his golden-brown hair waved back with the same determination. Of course, this boy's hair was much longer, but cut short, Elise knew it still wouldn't settle down neatly. It would always be unruly and the girls would always ache to smooth it for him.

The straight nose was Sloane's; the deep-set eyes were too. Even though Elise couldn't see their color, she'd bet her life they'd be that peculiar shade of pecan-shell brown that almost bordered on

gray. But it was his mouth that gave away his relationship to Sloane. It was a perfectly formed mouth, chiseled by a master hand, a mouth that could draw back in a sardonic grin or remain locked shut in an effort to avoid trouble.

Was the boy Sloane's nephew? A cousin? A son? The last seemed the most and the least likely. Elise hadn't seen Sloane in seventeen years, but she'd heard all about him. There were enough Tysons living in Miracle Springs to keep her informed, although Sloane's mother had died years before. She knew that he'd made a name for himself as an author. In fact, she'd read all his books. She knew that his personal life had been less successful. There'd been one marriage and one divorce a year later. To Elise's knowledge there'd been no child, but even if she was wrong and Sloane had had a son by that union, the boy would only be five or six. This boy was a teenager.

And yet, how could a cousin or a nephew emerge with Sloane's body and face? For that matter, as far as Elise knew, she had met all the Tysons. This boy was new in town.

As if he could feel her stare, the boy turned to face Elise. Even though politeness dictated that she look away, Elise could not. Instead she smiled tentatively. "Hi."

Elise accepted the fact that the boy would probably nod and move away. Talking to strange older women was no teenager's idea of a good time. Instead, he moved closer. "Hello," he said.

"You're new here, aren't you?" she asked, encouraged by his proximity.

"Yeah. We just got to town last week."

*And I've been out of touch,* Elise thought to herself. *Or I'd know who you are.* "I'm Elise Ramsey. I teach English at Miracle Springs High. Will you be a student there this year?"

"I guess. If they let me in," the boy said candidly. "My name's Clay."

"I'm glad to meet you, Clay."

He nodded as if it only made sense she'd be glad to meet him. "What grade do you teach?"

"Tenth. What grade will you be in?"

"I don't know yet. They're having trouble deciding what to do with me."

Elise frowned. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Well, most fifteen-year-olds are in tenth grade. Did your other school hold you back or push you forward?"

Clay smiled. "I've never been to school."

It was an answer Elise hadn't expected. "That's surprising," she said as nonchalantly as possible.

"Yeah, I guess it is." Clay came to stand beside her. "If they put me in tenth grade English, what will I be studying?"

"I put a lot of emphasis on writing," she told him, studying him with undisguised interest now that he was closer. His eyes *were* the color of Sloane's. The confirmation gave her a slight jolt. After all these years she still remembered exactly what Sloane Tyson's eyes looked like.

"What kind of writing?" Clay asked.

"Creative writing. Poetry, short stories, plays. We read a lot, too."

Clay nodded. "I'll like that. I've done lots of writing. I started a novel when I was thirteen, but I needed help getting over a hump and nobody at the ranch that year was a writer."

"The ranch?"

"Destiny Ranch, in New Mexico. I grew up there."

The name struck a familiar chord in Elise's memory, but she couldn't decide why. "I think I've heard that name before," she ventured.

"You probably have. They were always writing us up in the newspaper." Clay pointed at a group of kids standing by the water. "Do most of these kids go to the high school where you teach?"

"All of them and more besides. It's the only high school in the county, so kids are bused in from the surrounding area, too. You'll make lots of friends." But even as she said the words, Elise wondered how true they were. With his extravagant ponytail and his curious combination of adult intelligence and childlike candor, Elise wondered if Clay would stand out in a school where standing out was thought to be the worst possible crime.

But Clay had already shrugged off her optimistic prophecy. "I'm more interested in just finding someone I can talk to."

"Clay!" a voice on the other side of the dock shouted. "Clay!"

Without turning, Elise knew who was shouting. Somehow the day had been leading up to this. The silence that had punished her with images of her lonely future, Sloane's voice on the sidewalk, Sloane's image stamped on the boy sitting next to her. They had all been warnings of a confrontation that was yet to come.

"Sloane's calling me." Clay stood. "I'd better go. He hates to be kept waiting."

Not "Uncle Sloane," or "Dad." Not even the more formal, "my father."

"Clay," she said, her courage failing rapidly, "are you talking about Sloane Tyson?"

The boy nodded. The too familiar lines of his jaw were set now, and his body was suddenly tense.

"Yeah. See you later."

Elise raised her hand in salute as Clay walked away. She knew that all she had to do was turn her head. A slight rotation and she would see, once again, the only man who had ever meant anything to her. Instead she continued to stare at the sparkling turquoise spring and the raucous children on the beach. It was no surprise that she lacked courage where Sloane Tyson was concerned.

Seventeen years had passed, but she, like the town Sloane had hated, was still essentially the same. She could not take risks; she could not reach out for what she wanted. She was no different than she had been the day she told Sloane she would not marry him and leave Miracle Springs forever.

Long minutes passed and finally Elise stood, turning to begin the walk back home. The laughter and shouts from the beach were no longer comforting. They only reminded her of what was missing in her life.