

***Sunset Bridge* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

On Thursday afternoon of her Everglades canoe trip with lover, Marsh Egan, Tracy Deloche fell overboard into rotten egg scented water when her paddle lodged in a mangrove root. She stayed with the paddle and Marsh stayed with the canoe.

On Thursday evening of their Everglades canoe trip she discovered that their campground was a chickee, a wooden platform elevated above water that had rapidly turned to mud flats, and that the chickee came with no water, although it did come with a small family, two whining children and one portable toilet. The cheerful mom explained that this was a home schooling field trip, and the children would be up on and off all night recording whatever there was to see in their journals. She hoped Tracy and Marsh wouldn't be disturbed.

Next to sleeping on a deflating air mattress, the children were no problem at all.

By Friday evening of their Everglades canoe trip, Tracy Deloche was pretty sure she and Marsh were not meant to spend their lives together.

"Don't tell me about chiggers and no-see-ums! You think I need a biology lecture right now?" Tracy, perched on a fallen tree, was rolling up the legs of her jeans and spraying her legs with repellent as she spat out the words. Her ankles and calves felt like smoldering logs. Her arms ached from canoeing for hours along mazes of mangrove lined creeks. Her head throbbed from wood smoke billowing up her nostrils.

"Here's the deal, hot shot, unless you also want chiggers in places only I'm allowed to see, you'd better stand up and move over there." Marsh pointed to one of two plastic coolers on the other side of the campfire where an armload of salt-crustured driftwood was ramping up the smolder factor. "Chiggers thrive in dead wood."

Tracy leapt to her feet, not surprisingly bare, since that morning she'd found a scorpion in the toe of her water shoes—found it the hard way, in fact. Now she was taking her chances with flip-flops, since her big toe had swollen to twice it's normal size. Unfortunately the flip-flops seemed to have run for cover when her exchange with Marsh began to heat up.

"You know, we're supposed to be having fun here," Marsh said. "That's why I'm with you instead of the rest of the Wild Florida gang. That's why you're with me instead of back at Happiness Key fixing up a cottage for Wanda's daughter. Something going on I should know about? This whole weekend you've been wound tighter than a banjo string. The least little thing sends you screeching."

"Little?" Tracy pointed down to her legs, peppered with scarlet dots. "Is 'little' red-neck-speak for miserable?"

He squatted to take a closer look, running a finger along her calf before he looked up and smiled. "We'll smear your legs with petroleum jelly. You'll feel better, and I'll get a little thrill."

"Right. And it's the only thrill you're likely to get on this trip, too."

Marsh looked as if he was debating what to say to that. As always he was dressed a lot more like the Florida Cracker he claimed to be than the pit bull attorney director of one of Florida's most effective environmental organizations. His sandy hair was pulled back at his nape in a short ponytail and he needed a shave. His faded green T-shirt was ripped under one arm. His cut-offs needed a good trim, and his feet were happily bare. In fact he looked like the embodiment of Wild Florida, whose success at stopping a wetlands shopping mall, had been the motivation for this celebratory camping trip. Marsh was in his element.

Tracy was not.

"You said you wanted to come." He sprang back to his feet without even using his hands. "I told you it would be rugged."

Tracy was struggling to be fair. Knowing full well this was not going to be a weekend at the Beverly Hills Hotel, she had agreed to come along on the canoe and camping trip while Bay, Marsh's ten year old son, was spending a long weekend in California with his mother, Marsh's ex. Some of Marsh's staff were doing a longer, more grueling trip, but Marsh had given that up to plan this shorter one with Tracy.

Tracy had come a long way in the year plus that she'd lived in Florida, from spoiled Southern California socialite to a woman who held her own in almost any setting. Only not this one. Apparently the Wilderness Waterway of the Everglades was just a tad beyond her, or maybe, it was everything else in her life, rolled into one giant torturous sandspur, that was the problem.

Tears sprang to her eyes, so unusual that she immediately credited the campfire. She might be a lot of things, but never a cry baby. She hadn't even shed tears on the day that her husband, CJ Cramer, told her that life as she knew it had just ended and she was about to become the wife of a felon. Ex-wife, as it turned out, in a divorce she hadn't cried over, either.

Marsh looked perplexed, as if this Tracy Deloche was someone he didn't know or care to.

"Look," she said, "I'm trying. Okay? So you warned me. I thought I'd be fine. Just give me a moment to be miserable by myself."

He raised one brow. "I'm going fishing. We could use more firewood."

She heard him. Go in search of mangrove and buttonwood debris for the campfire, and while she was gone, please get her act together. More annoyed, she debated. All she

really wanted was to crawl into the tent and pull the sleeping bag over her head, only it was too hot. They hadn't waited until winter, when everyone else paddled the Wilderness Waterway. No, they'd come while the air was still warm and the bugs were frenzied, instead of simply omnipresent.

"I've got a great dinner planned," Marsh added, as if taking pity on her. "You'll feel better afterwards."

He was trying. She had to give him that. Last night they had eaten sandwiches and shared an apple, so how petty would it be to point out that not even rack of lamb or creme brulee was going to lighten her spirits, much less the chicken breasts marinating in a plastic bag in one of the coolers? She knew the menu because she'd sneaked a peek yesterday, before they even slid the canoe in the water. When she was still young, eager and looking forward to camping together.

"Has it ever occurred to you," she asked instead, "that the only time we're together we're like two good ol' boys swilling beer after an afternoon of taking our carburetors apart? When was the last time we did something that required a dress?"

"I don't look that good in ruffles." He leaned over and kissed her. "Don't stray far. Those dark clouds don't mean night's coming earlier, but hopefully, they'll pass. Get a whole armload, okay? If we can keep a good fire going, it will help with the bugs."

"Bugs." She shook her head so hard she felt her ponytail flick her cheek. "And I was so looking forward to more."

She didn't wait for a response. She started down the beach and around the end of the tiny key where they'd made their new campsite. She supposed she ought to be glad that tonight, Marsh had chosen a beach and not a Calusa Indian mound in the middle of the mangroves or yet another platform. This site allowed campfires, and it had a portable toilet down the beach from their tent, while many sites only had instructions. Just for her, she supposed. Considerate to a fault.

She determined not to go back until her mood improved. Sure, she could make a case for ruining the evening, but the thought gave her no pleasure. She had come on this trip because she wanted to spend time by herself with Marsh. As much as she enjoyed Bay, hours alone with his father were rare, and when the three of them were together, she and Marsh still promoted the illusion that Tracy was just a friend. Despite being lovers for two months.

Chalk up another problem.

Tracy realized she was still barefoot and decided to stay close to the water. The sun was sinking fast, and already the sky was layered with violet and amber. Although dark clouds were moving in, the gulf was still relatively calm. Normally she was a fan of evenings on the beach, and normally she was able to tolerate a little discomfort as payment. But since the moment she had helped Marsh drag the canoe into the water

near Everglades City, she'd been out of sorts and miserable. She almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

She had dragged more than a canoe on this trip. She had dragged problems that just weren't going away. She'd been feeling tired and out of sorts for weeks, unable to concentrate. Wanda, who lived in one of the five cottages Tracy owned in a shabby development called Happiness Key, had warned her this might be the start of menopause, even though Tracy was only thirty-five. Her periods had become increasingly spotty and erratic, although at her last checkup Tracy's doctor had blamed it on a prescribed break from birth control pills. Internet research pointed out that thirty-five was young for menopause, but not unheard of. She had made another doctor's appointment for next week, but she wasn't looking forward to the diagnosis.

She had never really yearned for a baby, and she wasn't even sure she had much to offer one. Still, having the decision taken away from her by a whacked-out biological clock, didn't seem fair. Night sweats, facial hair, a libido on holiday? None of it appealed to her. Change of life? She had just started to like the one she had, thank you very much.

When she'd called her mother, to see if such a thing ran in the family, Denise Deloche, with her usual level of maternal support, had cackled that maybe now, Tracy would finally understand what it felt like to be over the hill and poor. Good old Mom had never gotten over the fact that Tracy's ex had taken everyone in the family down on his way to prison for financial hanky-panky. Never mind that Tracy herself had lost everything along the way.

Well, almost everything. She had ended up with Happiness Key. Which was yet another problem.

Fifteen minutes later, hauling branches behind her, she was back at the tent. Charcoal hued clouds blanketed the horizon so that if the sun had already slipped behind it, she was none the wiser. But darkness was falling quickly, and Marsh's fire had already petered out.

In the distance she could see him about ten yards from shore, standing in water up to his hips, contentedly casting a line into water that was growing choppy as she watched.

She was filthy. She could wade out and splash off the worst of the dirt and sweat, but she doubted Marsh would appreciate her scaring away all hope of a catch. Instead she decided to fill a bowl and take a sponge bath with some of their limited store of water. There was no fresh water to be had in the park, but Marsh had assured her he'd brought enough for moderate baths along with cooking and drinking.

The guy was all heart.

She dug a metal bowl and a hand towel from a pile of supplies by the tent flap and found the bar of soap in her own small daypack, the only thing she'd been allowed to bring along in the crowded canoe. It contained little more than a few clothes and some toiletries. She'd hidden her secret stash of power bars and chocolate inside her sleeping bag, just in case Marsh got lost in the maze of mangrove trails, and their three day trip morphed into a spectacular rescue.

She'd already set out a change of clothes for tomorrow, but she decided to change her T-shirt after she washed. Maybe a clean T-shirt wasn't exactly dressing for dinner, but she probably owed Marsh that much. Soap, water, and a fresh coat of bug spray. She might feel almost human again.

Squatting, she threw open the tent flap and leaned forward to grab her shirt. From inside the tent a furry body launched itself in her direction. She fell backwards hoping to avoid attack.

By the time Marsh got to shore, Tracy's screams had dwindled to agitated whimpers.