

***Fortunate Harbor* by Emilie Richards**  
**Excerpt**

**PROLOGUE**

She wondered how everything had come to this. This wrenching decision, this wild, forsaken place, this final moment.

But the question was silly. Dana Turner knew, deep inside, what had brought her here, and what had brought him.

Every decision they had ever made.

Truth was always that simple, and that complicated. Every decision in a life filled with them had brought them back to Florida, back to this very place, where they had once laughed and romped together. The good decisions. The bad ones.

The ones that God must be mulling over even now. Because knowing what to do was never as easy as the self-righteous believed, and from time to time, even God must scratch His head and wonder.

She, of course, wondered unceasingly. These days she often traced the path of her life, the twists and turns, as if a map was spread out in front of her. At the beginning she had not been aware each step she took closed off one route, even as it opened another. She had believed she was walking her path with courage and resolve, even the most difficult detours. Doubt had only come with age, when the simplest decisions had suddenly ceased to make sense. When right and wrong seemed precariously balanced, but the scales could not be tipped. When everything she had done, despite all her doubts, had led her here, to the edge of the water where now she stood.

"You never worried the way I did," she said quietly. "Life wasn't simple or complicated for you, was it? Life just was. You knew what you wanted, and you always went after it. You didn't care who got in the way. You didn't care who you hurt. I doubt you even gave that much thought."

These were not the things one was supposed to say at the end of a life. She knew better. Now accusations were pointless. So were pleas. It was much too late for either. The road had ended, and there was no bridge in view here, only a wide stretch of bay glistening gold and orange in the rays of the sun setting somewhere behind her.

She watched in silence as the sky grew darker. Around her the night noises began. Alligators hid along this shore. She remembered that from other, better days here. Poisonous snakes. Venomous insects. She was cautious, and right to be so, but she was more afraid of the memories, the good ones, and the grief that would follow if she allowed them to come.

"Things could have been so different." Her eyes filled with tears. "Did you ever know that? Did you ever feel it?" She touched her chest with a clenched fist, and her voice faltered. "Is that why you wrote me that letter?"

There was no answer, nor had she expected one, of course. She was not a religious woman, but for a moment she imagined a reunion after death. Would he seek her out to remark on this evening and the things she had said? Would he ask for her forgiveness? Would he tell her that yes, he had loved her, despite all the things he had done, and the pain he had caused?

Just feet from shore a long-necked bird sailed past, calling shrilly for a mate, or perhaps simply proving it was still alive after another day of evading predators and foraging for food. She felt a tug of connection.

At last Dana lifted the daypack off her shoulders and swung it in front of her. She unzipped the pouch and removed a plastic cannister. Unscrewing the top, and without looking closely at the contents, she stepped forward and sprinkled the ashes it contained on to the narrow strip of wet sand leading to the bay. Not satisfied, she leaned forward and finished sprinkling those that remained in the cannister directly in the water, where the others would follow later as the tide rose.

"Peace be with you. . ." She tried, but she couldn't speak his name out loud. No one was listening, yet even now, she could not bring herself to admit the connection between herself and the man whose remains were gradually dissolving into Little Palmetto Bay.

A prayer was needed; she wanted to say one for her own sake, but none occurred to her. The man, who now was nothing more than a memory, deserved better than the gentle lapping of waves, the flapping of wings, the whine of mosquitoes.

She did her best. "May the joy we once felt in this place accompany you wherever you've gone."

She straightened. It was as much a prayer as she could manage. She wished Lizzie could have been here to say something, but Lizzie wouldn't have understood. Lizzie would have asked a million questions her mother could never answer. And Lizzie, who was just a little girl, might mention this night to somebody else, who then asked even more.

Theirs was a life of secrets, and this was simply one too many to expect her daughter to keep.

"I wish you could have known Lizzie, that it had been safe to let you know her," Dana said softly. "I think she might have touched your heart."

The sky darkened quickly into the purple-black of twilight, and the lights of the town across the bay twinkled in response. Dana turned and saw that the path she had trampled, the web draped branches she had snapped and twisted to get here, were growing dim. For a moment she imagined a better time, and perhaps those memories

were a final gift to her. She felt the heaviness in her heart lift a little, and the air that filled her lungs seemed the lighter, sweeter air they had breathed together, all those years ago.

"I love you," she whispered. "No matter what you did, I hope you know that never changed."

When she finally realized that soon, she might not be able to find her way back along dry ground, she left him to the bay he had loved, and the little harbor where they had once believed the world was theirs to conquer.