



ALWAYS ON MY MIND

Chapter 1



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A man stuck in paradise should have someone to share it with.

Especially on New Year's Eve.

Casper Christiansen angled his skiff along the shoreline toward the littered beach of Cay Comfort, the moniker given by the locals to this wash of beachfront in Old Port Royal, a tiny key off the island of Roatán, Honduras.

The island time forgot, the perfect place for a person to hide. To listen to his regrets. To figure out how to find everything he'd thrown away. Like his future. His self-respect.

And if that man could find the rumored treasure hidden in the east end of the island, he might even return with the pride he'd left behind in Minneapolis the day he found out his brother had a too-intimate history with the woman he loved.

Casper had followed the rumors of treasures away from the hustle of the west end resorts. Here lush, rolling hills brambled with bamboo and dense ferns fell into the sea, and towering coconut palms and thick-leaved sea grapes canopied the creamy white-sand beaches. Locals built homes on stilts, as if still in watch for pirates, the kind that stole their women and dragged chests of treasure ashore. The legends claimed said marauders had fortified themselves in the nearby limestone cliffs, securing their gold in the caverns before venturing back to sea to plunder the ships from the Spanish Main.

Casper had spent the better part of four months, in between diving for Fitz Hanson's archeological dig, plotting out exactly where pirates like Captain Morgan had secured such treasures.

And tonight, while the rest of the world celebrated New Year's Eve, he'd unearth old Morgan's treasure, start a new chapter of his life.

Casper raised his hand to a bronze-skinned ten-year-old perched at the end of his cayuka, fishing wire fastened around an old laundry bottle. He wore a Life is Good T-shirt, a pair of cutoff jeans, his hair long like Casper's.

The child waved back. "Grouper for you tonight, Mr. Casper!" The afternoon sun glinted off his smile.

Casper gave him a thumbs up. He'd eaten enough fish to grow fins.

Beyond the boy, the ocean stretched out beyond the curve of the bay, the aquamarine water so glassy it begged him to reach out for the sea anemone shadowing the ocean floor, run his fingers through the schools of blue tang and Creole wrasse scattering through the shoals.

But he knew better. The fertile rumors of shipwrecks and sunken pirate treasure, along with the hypnotizing ocean, lured a man into the turquoise depths and the dangerous labyrinth of coral latticed along the edge of the bay. Beyond the wall of jagged coral, deep into the underwater caverns, squid and moray eel lay in vigil, preying upon men lured by the hope of gold doubloons and fueled by the yarns perpetuated by locals eager for tourists.

Casper, however, had sorted the truth from the lies and knew why treasure eluded the hobby enthusiasts scouring the sea.

They were searching in the wrong place.

Casper angled his skiff out from shore, away from the tangle of mangroves that scarred this part of the island. Yellow nape parrots and lime and scarlet macaws sang from the shadows beyond the nest of vegetation, deep in the tropical forest, home to geckos, frogs, lizards, and ancient iguanas the size of a man.

The tepid wind off the sea combed his hair, the sea salty, drying his lips, his skin having turned leathery from his daily work at the *Valiant* wreck site.

Dig director, Fitz Hanson, seemed to believe the entire island – and its hidden treasures – belonged to him. If he knew what Casper did on his days off, he might fire him on the spot, send him packing back to snow-encrusted northern Minnesota, where, according to his mother, winter had turned bitter and angry, plunging them into sub-zero suffering.

Casper supposed he should feel guilty—in fact, yes, he did. But not because he was enjoying his days in the cerulean blue ocean, his nights watching the moonlight trace a milky finger over the waves.

No, his guilt.sank into his bones, had claws In the quiet of the night, the memory of his fury could shake him awake, fill his throat with regret.

He'd caused a rift in his family that he didn't know how—or even want, sometimes—to fix.

A white-faced monkey squealed at him from a gnarled banana tree, scampered away, and Casper angled the motorboat into the quay, where he'd first located the trail of set stones leading to shore.

The stones betrayed the tell-tale sign of a foundation, a mooring site for sloops such as the type Welsh privateer Henry Morgan might have utilized.

And, according to Casper's research, this little inlet just might contain Morgan's lost treasure, the one first unearthed over 75 years ago by infamous adventurer Ziegler Hanes. Tale had it that, once upon a time, a river ran through the forest into the bay. Along this river, pirates lugged their treasures through the forest until they reached a cave, embedded deep in the tangle. Ziegler Hanes had thrashed through enough mangrove to discover the cave, explored it, and unearthed three chests, wrapped in chains.

These he cut open, then dragged them one-by-one out to his ship, under the onslaught of a hurricane. Finally leaving behind the last chest, he'd nearly wrecked his ship escaping the island to nearby British Honduras.

Which meant the last treasure chest could still be here. Right here, in fact, if Casper had his calculations correct. And so what that he'd spent the past two months unearthing nothing but pop cans, metal wire, dented buckets, and rusted buoys? He'd nearly lost his heart once digging up what seemed like the find of the century, only to discover an ancient refrigerator.

Yet, deep down, Casper knew the treasure just waited for him. .

He moored the boat and retrieved his machete, his portable shovel, his metal detector and headphones, and stepped out into the forest.

He trekked into the green, remembering his steps, hacking at forest until he reached a clearing, his last search grid. Low-hanging sunlight streamed through the coconut palms, mottling the ground as he switched on the metal detector and fitted on his headphones.

Treasure hunting isn't going to give you a future, Casper. If you want to accomplish something in life, you have to work for it.

He shut his father's voice from his head. With sweat dribbling down his spine, wetting his long-sleeved shirt, the mosquitoes nibbling at his legs, and the no-see-ums dive-bombing his neck, yeah, he could consider this work.

He got a hit and spent ten minutes with too-eager enthusiasm unearthing a rotted tin can.

Blowing out a breath, he drew his arm across his forehead. His stomach clenched, empty after this morning's plum jam on bread.

Is that what you want? To be a treasure hunter?

He shook away Raina's voice, but she never escaped far, haunting him just beyond his thoughts.

I'd like to find something precious, yes.

Six months ago, he thought he had, in Raina.

He swallowed, needing a drink, something cool against his parched throat.

An hour later, Casper set the detector down and pulled the headset off his ears. He'd uncovered another tin can and a cup. A real haul. Maybe his pal Doug was right when he suggested Casper head home when the new interns arrived in two weeks.

He hadn't exactly discovered a lost fortune. And he'd spent most of his time helping Fitz haul old cannons, tin plates, and the occasional charred wooden beam from the ocean floor.

He felt more like a day laborer than an archeologist.

So, you're like what's his name—Indiana Jones?

Raina again, and for a second, he let her settle there, remembering her in his arms under a northern moon. The way she twirled his hair around her finger, made him believe that he could be happy in Deep Haven, discovering a life with her.

Slinging the metal detector over his shoulder, he turned it on but kept the headphones around his neck as he trekked back. He swung the detector loosely over the ground, following the tumble of rocks that could have been a stream, perhaps.

Or maybe he was simply afflicted with an overactive imagination. The ability to tell himself a good yarn, make himself believe it.

Like the fact that he could have a happily ever after with a woman who clearly saw him as second choice.

See, there she went again, tiptoeing into his brain and perching there.

Yeah, pitiful man that he was, he could admit he still thought about, even cared for, Raina Beaumont. Probably more since he'd escaped the family drama and soaked himself in the sun day after day.

Casper nearly missed the shrieking of the detector as he stepped out of the jungle, fifty feet down the beach from his skiff.

The needle bumped into the red and he dropped the detector, grabbed his shovel.

The sun hung low, an orange fire glowing over the horizon. As the trees slung shadows across the beach, he dug furiously against the onslaught of twilight.

His shovel hit metal. Dropping to his knees, he worked out the sand and ran his fingers over what looked like a rusty piece of chain.

For mooring a boat.

Casper sat back, ran his thumb over it, his heart sinking.

Except . . .

He looked closer. The chain seemed hand-hammered, the edges of each link rough and not engineered.

In fact—he pulled the rest of the chain from the earth, found the end. His pulse caught by the sight of the ancient padlock, broken open.

He examined it, his mind turning through his research and landing on the story of Hanes and his third chest of doubloons.

Abandoned under the storm's onslaught, the chain broken off.

Casper got up and began to run the detector in a grid around the chain, back into the forest, where the mangroves had taken root.

The detector shrilled and he dropped it, retrieving his shovel and beginning to dig.

The now milky twilight pressed shadows into the divots of the soil as his hand fastened around plate-sized pieces of broken metal. What he wouldn't give for a flashlight.

He leaned into the hole and cleared away the sand, his breath short as he ran his fingers over the rough, rotting top of a box.

Sweat blackened his hands as he cleared away the dirt, trying to lug the box from the sand. It refused to budge. Casper attacked the hole with his shovel, widening it enough to wiggle the box lid free.

What if—?

He crawled his fingers along the edge, hoping to find the bottom of the lid, but as he handled it, the box creaked and the lid broke free, off its hinges.

The archeologist inside halted him.

But he knew what manner of men haunted these islands. If he left the box here, by tomorrow it would be looted.

As sweat dripped off his chin, saturating his shirt, Casper eased the broken lid open.

Muddy water filled the inside.

He held his breath as he plunged his hand into the murky contents.

Silt sifted between his fingers. He worked them deeper, found the edges, then the bottom, his fingers scraping against wood, then . . . rock.

No.

Oh no. He felt around the hole in the bottom of the box where the elements had bashed it against rock, destroying the wood.

And the storm had washed away any gold doubloons, any looted spoils from the Spanish ships sacked by the legendary pirates of the Caribbean.

Casper pulled out a handful of gray mud, watching it leech out of his grip.

Around him, bats awoke, blotting out the darkening sky, screeching. Monkeys screamed back, and mosquitoes sawed in his ears.

He closed his eyes to his audience.

Happy New Year.