A man and a woman are shown from the chest up, smiling warmly at each other. The man is on the left, wearing a grey coat over a plaid shirt. The woman is on the right, wearing a grey knit sweater. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor scene, likely in winter.

SUSAN MAY
WARREN

Christy Award-winning author

*Always
on my
Mind*

*a
Christiansen Family
novel*

Praise for the Christiansen Family Series

When I Fall in Love

“[*When I Fall in Love* is] an exquisite romance. Profoundly touching on the topic of facing fears, this book is a true gem.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Readers who are already enamored of the sprawling Christiansen clan will feel even more connected, while those new to Warren will be brought right into the fold.”

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BOOKLIST

“*Take a Chance on Me* is the first of six books in this new series from prolific author Susan May Warren—and I couldn’t be more excited! I’ve already fallen in love with the Christiansen family . . . and I can’t wait to see how Warren brings true and lasting love into the lives of Darek’s two brothers and three sisters.”

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“Warren’s latest is a touching tale of love discovered and the meaning of family.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

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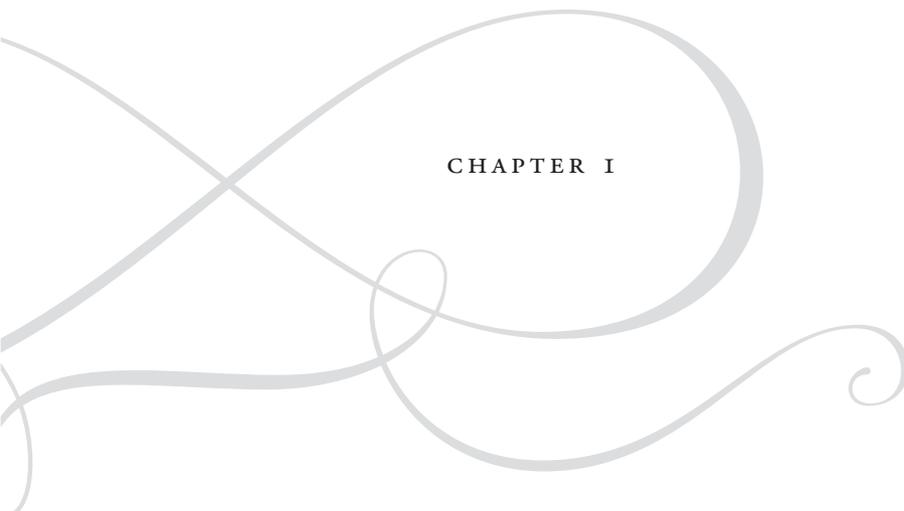
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CHAPTER I

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 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

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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 on watch for pirates, the kind that stole their women and dragged chests of gold doubloons ashore. The legends claimed marauders had fortified themselves in the nearby limestone cliffs, securing their gold in 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 archaeological 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 detergent bottle. He wore a *Life is good* T-shirt and 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.

Past the boy, the ocean stretched 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 among the shoals.

But he knew better. Fertile rumors of shipwrecks and sunken 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 in underwater caverns, squid and moray eels 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 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-naped 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.

A tepid wind off the sea combed his hair, the air 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 subzero 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.

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

The stones betrayed the telltale 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 seventy-five 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 to a cave embedded deep in the tangle.

Ziegler Hanes had thrashed through enough mangroves to discover the cave, explored it, and unearthed three chests wrapped in chains. These he cut open, then dragged 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 waited just for him.

He moored the boat and retrieved his machete, a portable shovel, his metal detector, and headphones.

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 archaeologist.

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 ran

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her fingers through his hair, 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 a 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 tale, 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. Falling 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, 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 at the sight of an 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 had 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-size pieces of broken metal. He leaned into the hole and cleared away the sand, his breath short as he touched 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 archaeologist 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.

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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 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 leach 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.



If the fifty waiting guests were depending on Raina Beaumont to get the bride to the altar, located in the fireplace room of the posh Summit Hill mansion, they should pack up and head home before the snowstorm buried them all for the weekend.

Because Raina hadn't a clue how to answer cute Gina McCune, despite the look of desperation in her young and worried brown eyes.

“What would you do?”

Pearl Jam's “Just Breathe” threaded out into the hall, signaling the processional.

“I . . .” Raina glanced toward the front, connected with Michele, the bride's mother.

Oh, boy. They wanted *her* advice? Did no one notice the fact that their wedding coordinator sported a pregnant belly under her not-so-little black dress? Not that anyone could guess that the father had ditched her long before he even knew about her condition. Still, she hardly felt able to dispense wisdom.

Maybe, however, no one noticed her swollen ankles or the way she bumped around the room like a tank. Probably today's activities—the decorating crew, the cake delivery, the flowers—simply distracted everyone from her cumbersome girth.

Even her boss, Grace Christiansen, had refrained from ordering her to sit, put her swollen feet up, breathe through the occasional Braxton-Hicks contractions.

But given that the elite bash counted as Grace's first major wedding-catering gig, perhaps Grace didn't have time to spare a thought for her assistant's grand mistakes in life.

Raina and the bride had to figure out their futures on their own.

Gina blinked, fast, hard, staring at her bouquet of blue hydrangeas and white roses. "It seems right, but it's the rest of my life. And . . ." She glanced through the half-parted double oak doors to her groom, Kalen Boomer, tall, blond, and swarthy, a hockey goalie for the St. Paul Blue Ox. He stood next to the green-tiled fireplace, beside his best man and the pastor he'd imported from his hometown. Kalen clasped his hands in front of him and stared at the floor.

Gina turned back to Raina. "How do I know I want this? I mean, yes, I love Kalen—so much it hurts sometimes—but how do I know that we'll be happy ten years from now? That he'll still love me?"

Raina opened her mouth, glancing past the petite bride toward the massive dining room, holding the delicious reception

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Grace had created. Garlands of white pine boughs wrapped with twinkle lights hung from the windows, the chandelier, the wainscoting. The collection of round tables glittered with gold chargers crowned with red glass plates over an ivory tablecloth, the room fragrant with the scent of cinnamon-stick favors wrapped at the head of each plate.

Raina held her breath, willing Grace to appear with some pithy words of wisdom. Her roommate always seemed to have something profound for Raina over the past six months as she struggled to figure out the rest of her life.

“What I wouldn’t give to just . . . *know*. To see the future and know I’m making the right decision. Some sort of lighted path,” Gina was saying. “I mean, look at you. You’re happy and married and have a baby on the way . . .”

Oh. So someone did notice. And probably thought Raina had removed her wedding ring to accommodate swollen fingers. It wasn’t like she’d had a deep and personal conversation about her marital status with Gina over the past three months, and Grace had handled all but the most recent in-person planning sessions.

Gina’s eyes grew glossy. She drew in a breath.

If Raina didn’t conjure up something, this entire thing could trek south in a heartbeat. A sudden image of the bride escaping through the kitchen, upsetting a tray of champagne shrimp, flashed through her mind.

But frankly—good question. How did anyone make a lifelong decision like marriage? Or whether to be a single mother or give up her child for adoption?

Likely any advice Raina gave the bride would only turn out to haunt the poor girl. Besides, sweet Gina seemed to have done everything right, her future nothing but sunny.

As far as Raina peered ahead, she saw only darkness.

She tried a reassuring smile but clearly managed to scare the bride because Gina's eyes filled.

Then—"Shh, honey."

Raina turned to see the bride's mother slipping through the doors. Tall, elegant, blonde, and not a hint of the Asian descent evident in her daughter, she appeared to be in her early fifties and still wore her wedding ring, despite her recent widowhood.

"Mom—sorry. I'm just having a second of . . . Well, how do I know this is the right decision?" Gina turned to her, and Raina stepped back, watching the moment she'd always longed for herself.

A mother's advice.

Michele took her daughter's hands. "We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but you can't live your life fearing the what-ifs. Kalen is a wonderful man, and he becomes the right decision the minute you say, 'I do.' The bigger question is, are you ready to make that decision?"

No. Raina wanted to scream it out for Gina—or maybe herself. With only six weeks left . . .

Her hand slid up to press against the baby's foot, lodged just below her ribs.

"Yes." The shadows cleared from Gina's expression. She peeked through the doors, a soft smile lifting. "Yes."

Her mother held out her arm. "How about if I walk you to meet your groom? Your father would have preferred to do it, but I know he's watching."

Now a tear ran off Raina's chin. She forced a smile and held open the doors as Gina and her mother headed down the aisle.

Gina met her groom, and Raina slid off her shoes, watching

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them exchange vows. As the ceremony progressed, she picked them up and headed to the kitchen.

The holiday dinner aroma could knock her over—roasted beef au jus, garlic mashed potatoes, freshly baked wheat dinner rolls. In her last trimester her appetite had returned with the ferocity of a wildebeest.

Grace managed the kitchen—and her small staff—with the skills of a general. Raina watched her and for a moment wished she could be assembling the spring salad rather than manning the front lines.

But she simply couldn't move with the same speed as before. Maybe after . . . when . . . what?

She hadn't a clue what her life might look like by spring.

Grace glanced up from where she stood plating baked Brie and crackers—appetizers for the guests. “Is the ceremony almost over?”

“Ten minutes or so. How are we doing in here?”

“Perfect.” Grace glanced at Ty Teague, down for the weekend from Deep Haven, helping out as a server. He looked debonair and festive, wearing a tux and white gloves, his curly dark hair freshly groomed. “We might actually pull this off.”

“Of course we will,” Raina said. “I wasn't sure for a moment, though.”

Grace met her eyes, stricken. “Why? Oh no, did she have cold feet again?”

“You knew about this?” Raina barely stopped herself from reaching for one of the plump shrimp curled around a champagne glass filled with spicy cocktail sauce. “She nearly didn't walk down the aisle. Started asking me if I thought she should get married. As if I know.”

She moved aside for Ty and Nash—one of Grace's culinary

school recruits—to deliver the appetizers to the parlor, where the reception festivities would begin.

Grace finished plating the next Brie appetizer, then picked up oven mitts. She opened the oven. “She’s just hurting over her father’s death. It’s hard—losing him so close to the wedding.”

“Yeah. Sad. I get it.” Sort of. After all, Raina had lost her father too. But he’d been in jail. And she hadn’t exactly kept in touch.

“And she’s their only child. They really thought he’d beat the cancer this time—hence why they hurried the wedding. Kalen only met her this summer.” She checked the lasagna, then returned it to the oven. “Nearly ready.”

Grace pulled off the hot pads. “I met her dad once, about three weeks before he passed. He was so proud of her—and really liked Kalen, which is saying something. He was so . . . I don’t know. *Possessive* is not the right word, but . . . doting? Maybe because they had to fight so hard to adopt Gina—I think they went to China three times before they finally brought her home. Gina said she was four, and by that time, she needed six operations to fix her leg. They spared no expense on her. I think she even graduated from Princeton.”

Grace directed Aliya, one of her favorite assistants, to start bringing the salads to the dining room.

Raina picked up two plates. “She never mentioned her leg.”

Grace held open the door. “Yeah, she was born with a deformity or maybe was injured in birth. Anyway, she’s fine now.”

Raina set the salad plates on the chargers. Glanced toward the wedding. “Beautiful, in fact.”

Grace touched Raina’s hand, gave it a quick squeeze before she went back to the kitchen.

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Raina slipped her shoes on and headed to the double doors just as she heard the pastor announce the couple.

No hint of regret creased Gina's face as she held hands with her groom and walked back up the aisle. They disappeared for a moment into the parlor while the rest of the party exited, then returned to dismiss the guests. Raina directed the crowd toward the parlor for appetizers.

"You look pretty tonight, Raina."

The voice startled her, and for a split second, in that place where she parked her dreams, she heard the deep tenor of Casper Christiansen complimenting her.

When she turned, the man talking to her could be mistaken for him, with dark-brown hair, long behind his ears, and kind eyes.

Except, no—this man had a beard and brown eyes and, well, belonged to Grace. "Thanks, Max," Raina said.

Maxwell Sharpe slicked up well in a black suit and silver tie. "My girl in the kitchen?"

"Yes." She reached out to touch his arm, stopping him. "But you are assigned to the parlor. You're a guest, not staff."

He made a face at her, and for a second she thought he might disobey—after all, hockey players didn't exactly mind their manners.

But he surrendered to her words and disappeared to celebrate with the guests.

And Raina surrendered, just for a second, to sinking down on the arching dark oak staircase. The piano and cello from the ceremony continued to play, and "A Thousand Years" lilted out.

She ran her hands over her stomach, listening to the laughter from the parlor, the sweet music echoing into the hall, and drew in a long breath. Her throat ached. See, a girl with this many hormones flooding her body had no business at a wedding. It only

conjured up too-tangible images of the man she'd driven away. The man she could never have. Not after the wounds she'd raked into his heart.

And now just the flash of memory could stir up Casper's smile, the feel of his summer-toned arms around her, and if she didn't get herself under control, she just might end up in a puddle.

She pressed her fingers under her eyes, shook him from her mind. He'd left—and who blamed him, anyway? She had to move on.

Ty came out, carrying glasses of champagne. He glanced at her, frowning, his sweet brown eyes suddenly concerned. She shook her head, smiled, waved him into the parlor.

"Raina, dear, thank you for your help in keeping Gina calm." Michele emerged from the room, and Raina made to push up from the stairs. "Oh no—you sit. You have to keep that little bundle safe." Michele slid onto the stairs next to her. "If my Steven were here, he'd be offering to rub your feet. He did that for all three of my pregnancies."

Raina glanced at her.

"Oh yes, I was pregnant. Lost the last one at six months. I was never able to carry to term. But God had other wonderful plans." She stared into her champagne, golden and glistening against the hall chandelier. Outside, the wind blew snow against the window-pane, rattling it. "Steven tried so hard to hang on until this day. Would have, if not for the staph infection. He went so fast."

Michele forced a smile. "Such a beautiful wedding, despite the storm. I think we might have a few overnight guests."

"It's still early, and Grace has dinner ready—"

"And it smells delicious." She touched Raina's hand. "So have you and your husband picked out any names?"

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Raina shook her head. Didn't correct her. After all, what could she say? *I have no husband? This baby is the result of a one-night stand?* The enormity of her stupidity could take her breath away.

"Nothing?"

"I . . . can't settle on anything." Starting with whether she'd be the one naming her baby.

"You never know when that baby might want to show up."

"As long as it's not tonight," Raina said, her hand running over her bulk as the baby decided to shift.

Michele laughed. "Yes. That might add too much excitement to the evening. Happy New Year, Raina. I predict next year is going to be wonderful."

Raina managed a nod as the bride's mother joined the party. No, the baby wasn't coming tonight.

Which meant she could figure out the rest of her life tomorrow.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

WHAT DO YOU do when you love someone who seems bent on self-destruction? Worse, when they seem incapable of listening to reason?

Pray. Hope. Love anyway.

I came upon this story idea after hearing about a woman who had inadvertently walked into an abusive relationship. She didn't exactly know how she got there—just that one day she opened her eyes to the truth. But she'd told herself so many lies that tracing her path toward this abuser seemed almost natural. She accepted abuse because of her inability to believe she was worthy of anything else.

Those outside the horror warned her. Wanted—tried—to wave her off. And watched with torn hearts as she entwined herself in a situation that nearly cost her and her children their lives.

Eventually the abuser hurt someone else—someone less afraid, less intimidated, less willing to believe lies—and was imprisoned. Justice finally.

So often, believers are like this woman: we stand in our mistakes, our sins, our regrets, and determine that we don't deserve

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love. So we accept less—even abuse—because we can't lift our eyes off ourselves and onto truth.

Jesus stands outside the lies, waving at us to stop our self-destruction, to believe Him for freedom, to reach out for His love, to trust His justice. And He asks us, as Christians, to stand in the darkened pathways and shed light.

I wanted to write a story about a man who couldn't escape the pull of love God had for the broken, the lost—and yet depict the agony of seeing them run away into destruction. Just as God must feel when we push Him away and stubbornly head into darkness. Casper seemed exactly the right person to shoulder this task . . . even though it could have cost him so much.

That kind of love cost Jesus even more . . . cost Him everything.

But Jesus, like Casper, is a treasure hunter who has come to seek and save the lost. I love the fact that He believes we are worth the search.

And Raina—who lived always looking behind her—had to learn to look ahead, outside her comfort zone, into faith. I love the message that when we look at ourselves, we get afraid. After all, it's true: how can such a wretch be redeemed? We can't if we depend on ourselves. But if we depend on God . . .

Well, as John Christiansen says, "What does love do? Forgives. Comforts. Protects. Saves. Renews. *Loves.*"

Friends, look forward, your face to the wind, and live large in God's love. Jesus says you are worth the search, worth His outrageous, unwavering love for you, despite the cost.

Thank you for reading Raina and Casper's story. With Casper off to find Owen . . . well, it's time for Amelia to come up with an answer, don't you think? Can she forgive the man who broke her

Susan May Warren

heart? More, will she choose her high school sweetheart, Seth, or this European blue blood? Which would you choose?

In His grace,
Susan May Warren