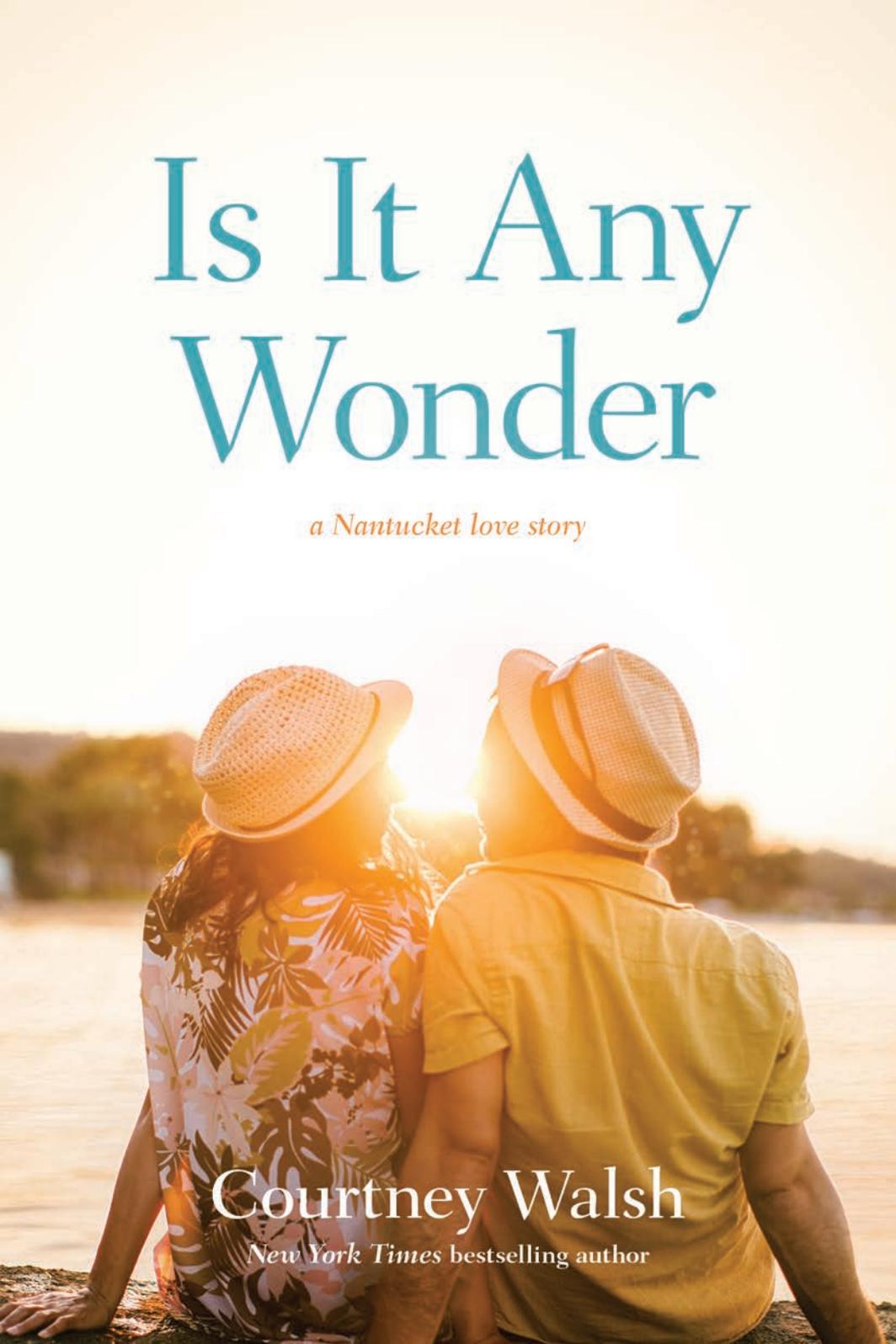


Is It Any Wonder

a Nantucket love story

A romantic scene of a couple sitting on a rock by the water at sunset. The woman on the left wears a white shirt with a green and brown tropical leaf pattern and a light-colored woven hat. The man on the right wears a yellow polo shirt and a similar woven hat. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow over the water and the couple's silhouettes.

Courtney Walsh

New York Times bestselling author

Praise for Novels by
COURTNEY WALSH



IS IT ANY WONDER

“With her signature heart and charm, Courtney Walsh weaves a story of forgiveness, hope, and enduring ties that proves it’s never too late for a second chance. An idyllic Nantucket backdrop, a deeply guarded secret, and an epic love story make *Is It Any Wonder* the perfect read for right now. Courtney Walsh once again shines as a master storyteller.”

KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *FEELS LIKE FALLING*

“Courtney Walsh’s books always capture my heart! I love her poignant plotlines, quaint, small-town settings, and the romance she skillfully weaves through the pages.”

BECKY WADE, AUTHOR OF *STAY WITH ME*

IF FOR ANY REASON

“Second chances and new discoveries abound in this lovely tale from Walsh, featuring a nostalgic romance set against the backdrop of Nantucket. . . . Readers of Irene Hannon will love this.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“*If for Any Reason* is a ‘double romance’ novel, beautifully written, poignantly sad in parts, but full of hope throughout. It is altogether a lovely book, with a strong Christian message and a really good story, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

“Warm and inviting, *If for Any Reason* is a delightful read. I fell in love with these characters and with my time in Nantucket. Don’t miss this one.”

ROBIN LEE HATCHER, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
WHO I AM WITH YOU

“*If for Any Reason* took me and my romance-loving heart on a poignant journey of hurt, hope, and second chances. . . . From tender moments to family drama to plenty of sparks, this is a story to be savored. Plus, that Nantucket setting—I need to plan a trip pronto!”

MELISSA TAGG, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *NOW AND THEN AND ALWAYS*

JUST LET GO

“Walsh’s charming narrative is an enjoyable blend of slice-of-life and small-town Americana that will please Christian readers looking for a sweet story of forgiveness.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Original, romantic, and emotional. Walsh doesn’t just write the typical romance novel. . . . She makes you feel for all the characters, sometimes laughing and sometimes crying along with them.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“A charming story about discovering joy amid life’s disappointments, *Just Let Go* is a delightful treat for Courtney Walsh’s growing audience.”

RACHEL HAUCK, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“*Just Let Go* matches a winsome heroine with an unlikely hero in a romantic tale where opposites attract. . . . This is a page-turning, charming story about learning when to love and when to let go.”

DENISE HUNTER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
HONEYSUCKLE DREAMS

“Just the kind of story I love! Small town, hunky skier, a woman with a dream, and love that triumphs through hardship. A sweet story of reconciliation and romance by a talented writer.”

SUSAN MAY WARREN, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JUST LOOK UP

“[A] sweet, well-paced story. . . . Likable characters and the strong message of discovering what truly matters carry the story to a satisfying conclusion.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“*Just Look Up* by Courtney Walsh is a compelling and consistently entertaining romance novel by a master of the genre.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“This novel features a deeply emotional journey, packaged in a sweet romance with a gentle faith thread that adds an organic richness to the story and its characters.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA TODAY* HAPPY EVER AFTER BLOG

“In this beautiful story of disillusionment turned to healing, Walsh brings about a true transformation of restored friendships and love.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET MAGAZINE

CHANGE OF HEART

“Walsh has penned another endearing novel set in Loves Park, Colo. The emotions are occasionally raw but always truly real.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“*Change of Heart* is a beautifully written, enlightening, and tragic story. . . . This novel is a must-read for lovers of contemporary romance.”

RADIANT LIT

PAPER HEARTS

“Walsh pens a quaint, small-town love story . . . [with] enough plot twists to make this enjoyable to the end.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Be prepared to be swept away by this delightful romance about healing the heart, forgiveness, [and] following your dreams.”

FRESH FICTION

“Courtney Walsh’s . . . stories have never failed to delight me, with characters who become friends and charming settings that beckon as if you’ve lived there all your life.”

DEBORAH RANEY, AUTHOR OF THE CHICORY INN
NOVELS SERIES

“Delightfully romantic with a lovable cast of quirky characters, *Paper Hearts* will have readers smiling from ear to ear! Courtney Walsh has penned a winner!”

KATIE GANSHERT, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *A
BROKEN KIND OF BEAUTIFUL*

“*Paper Hearts* is as much a treat as the delicious coffee the heroine serves in her bookshop. . . . A poignant, wry, sweet, and utterly charming read.”

BECKY WADE, AUTHOR OF *MEANT TO BE MINE*

IS IT ANY WONDER

ALSO BY COURTNEY WALSH

IF FOR ANY REASON

JUST LOOK UP

JUST LET GO

PAPER HEARTS

CHANGE OF HEART

JUST ONE KISS

THINGS LEFT UNSAID

HOMETOWN GIRL

A SWEETHAVEN SUMMER

A SWEETHAVEN HOMECOMING

A SWEETHAVEN CHRISTMAS

Courtney Walsh

Is It Any Wonder

a Nantucket love story



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For my readers,
many of whom have become my friends.
I am so thankful for you.

P R O L O G U E

Dear Mr. Boggs,

It's been five years since you died, and I've thought about you every single day since. If I close my eyes, I can imagine I'm ten years old and you're down at the beach building sandcastles with me and Cody.

None of the other parents ever wanted to play with us, but you were always more than willing. I mean, you couldn't have actually liked being buried to your neck in sand . . . but you let us do it. You even smiled for pictures like that.

I can't help but think that what happened was my fault. At least indirectly. I mean, don't get me wrong, I hate it in movies when people seem so broken up with guilt over something that's clearly not their fault—but what happened to you kind of was my fault, wasn't it?

Is it any wonder that I wish I could take it back? I wish I could say I'm sorry. I wish I could rewind and change everything about that night. I hurt you. I hurt Cody. I hurt Mrs. Boggs and Marley. I even hurt my own parents because the moment they told us you were gone, everything changed. It was like we'd been plummeted into a jar of molasses, like we were moving in slow motion, swimming through a thick cloud of sorrow.

IS IT ANY WONDER

Will the cloud ever go away? Will it always hang here, a sad reminder that the choice of a foolish girl could impact so many lives, destroy so many friendships?

I don't know. And I don't know why I'm writing. I know you'll never read these words. It helps, though, at least a little bit. It makes me feel better putting it out there into the world, the fact that I'm so horribly sorry for what I've done.

I pray one day you can forgive me. I pray one day you will all forgive me.

*Love,
Louisa*

CHAPTER ONE



SEVEN YEARS LATER

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Not that there was time to think about it now. Not with the waves growing and the wind blowing and her paddle floating away, pulled out to sea by a storm she hadn't seen coming.

Louisa Chambers inhaled a sharp breath as the water swelled and a wave crashed over her head. Her legs kicked against the water of Nantucket Sound as she heaved her body up onto the paddleboard.

So much for a quiet morning out on the water.

She sighed. Her father would be so angry with her if she died paddleboarding.

"How many times have I told you to wear a life vest?" he'd say. "You don't challenge death, kitten."

He still called her kitten. She might actually miss that if she died.

She knew all too well the realities of death—she didn't need reminding. But maybe death needed to know she wasn't scared of it.

I'm not scared. I'm strong. I'm stronger than I look.

Again she willed herself to stay calm. Her paddle was officially gone.

She wasn't far from Madaket Beach—she'd hang on to her board and kick her way back. It was early, just after sunrise, but someone would be up soon. Mr. Dallas with his golden retriever, maybe. Or one of the McGuires.

But the wind intensified and pushed her in the wrong direction, sending her into deeper, choppiest waters. The shoreline stretched on forever, and the water kept moving her farther and farther away from it.

Her hand slipped off the paddleboard, and she gasped as a wave smacked her in the face.

How many times have I told you to wear a life vest?

Her dad's voice echoed in her ear—louder this time—and rightfully so. She should've listened. She should've—*whack*. Another wave, this one bringing with it a mouthful of water. She spit it out and struggled back to her board, barely latching on to it as the current kicked up again.

She coughed, white-knuckling the paddleboard and scanning the shore, the horizon, the open sea.

Nothing.

That was when she began to realize she might actually be in danger. That was when she thought, *I could die out here.*

Who would handle the Timmons anniversary party if she died? How would she ever show Eric she was completely over him—even though, in reality, she wasn't sure she was? Who would water that stupid houseplant her mother had sent over from Valero and Sons “because you need practice keeping something alive if you're ever going to have children”?

She wanted to have children, so she needed to make sure that plant lived.

She draped her torso over the paddleboard and tried not to think about sharks. She tried to think about something happier.

Beaches on Nantucket Close after at Least a Dozen Shark Sightings.

It was the headline of an article she'd stumbled across online only two weeks prior. Were the sharks gone? Were they circling her at that exact moment?

And then, all of a sudden, the image of a smiling Daniel Boggs flittered through her mind.

Is this how you felt, Mr. Boggs?

That image had no business haunting her, not now when she'd been doing so well. But a wave tossed her forward, and she barely managed to hold on to the board, so she closed her eyes and prayed.

Because right about now, she needed a miracle.

Mr. Boggs had probably prayed for the same thing and look how that had turned out.

Maybe this was what she deserved. Maybe this was payback for what she'd done. Maybe this was God's way of reminding her that actions had consequences.

Actions like not wearing a life vest. Or breaking someone's heart.

She'd been working how many years to try to make amends for her mistakes? Would it ever be enough? Would forgiveness ever come?

It occurred to her that on normal days she was excellent at pushing these thoughts away. In fact, most days she didn't even have to work at it.

Apparently being faced with the end of one's life resulted in this. A deep dive into all the things she'd been successfully avoiding. As if there weren't more important things to be thinking about. Like staying alive.

If only she had a single clue how to do that.

"God, I'm pretty sure I don't deserve to be rescued, and I'm not in the habit of asking for help, which I'm sure you know. But it would be super awesome if you could maybe shift the wind and give me a push toward the shore."

The waves just kept pulling her deeper and farther away.

She supposed miracles were in high demand these days. And maybe it simply wasn't her turn. She clung to the board as fear welled

up inside her. Panic buzzed somewhere down deep, and she tried to keep it from overtaking her.

She'd make a list like she always did to help sort out her anxiety.

A wave swelled, and she let out a scream (and she really was not the screaming type, so it surprised even her), but the water settled her back down, and somehow she still had hold of the board.

A list. Okay . . . what to list? *Things to do* seemed a bit pointless given her current situation.

Another swell, and she swallowed a mouthful of water. She coughed—hard—then drew in a clean breath.

Things I wish I'd done in my life. A bucket list made moments before my impending death.

- *I wish I'd worn a life vest.*
- *I wish I'd checked the weather forecast.*
- *I wish I had put on waterproof mascara (because when they find my body, it would be nice not to look so dead).*
- *I wish I hadn't wasted so much time on Eric Anderson.*
- *I wish I'd said I was sorry.*
- *I wish I'd mailed the letters.*
- *I wish I'd made it to my golden birthday.*

After all, she'd spent twelve years wondering if he'd show. Or maybe that pact had been long forgotten, sucked down to the depths like dirt down a drain.

The next wave enveloped Louisa completely, heaving her under for so many seconds she was certain she'd lost the way back up and into the air. But no, another toss and there it was again—glorious oxygen.

She inhaled a sharp breath and coughed.

I wish I'd fallen in love.

She looked up at the sky, which had turned gray and dark. She hadn't realized she had so many regrets. Her teeth chattered and she started to tire. These waves were kicking her butt. She'd practically

resigned herself to dying when she spotted a headlight—a boat out in the sound.

She tried to lift her arm, but it was so heavy. She tried hauling herself onto the board, but she didn't have the strength. Maybe she wasn't doing as well as she thought. Maybe she'd already half died. She looked for a white light in the sky but saw nothing.

Maybe white lights were only for people who weren't responsible for someone else's death.

She'd never get over that as long as she lived, though it seemed that might not be much longer. Unless someone in that boat was the answer to her prayer.

She had to stay awake. She had to hold on. They had to see her.

Please see me.

The boat cut through the water, tossing in the wind, and again Louisa tried to wave.

I wish I'd fallen in love.



It was supposed to be routine. Summer on Nantucket hadn't even started yet, but when Cody Boggs spotted the yellow paddle floating in the water, his gut wrenched.

They'd gotten a call from someone on the beach only moments ago—possible swimmer in the water.

"It's hard to make out," the caller had said. "But I felt like I should call. If it's a person, they're in danger."

Cody was already out on the water, his first time on the boat with the crew, so they sped toward the reported sighting. They were about to give up when Cody saw it. A paddle, but no kayak. No paddleboard. No canoe. No person.

Odd.

"Slow down," he told the ship's coxswain. He glanced at one of the petty officers. "Do you see that?"

A tight line creased the other man's brow. "The paddle? Yeah."

"I'm going to take a look." Cody pushed through the door and out onto the deck of the lifeboat, where two other men stood.

"See something, sir?"

"Not sure." Cody scanned the water through his binoculars, looking for any sign, pausing on the shoreline of Nantucket.

The one place he swore he'd never be stationed. The one place they needed him.

The paddle bobbed in the water. The wind had kicked up, one of those instances where the weather changed without notice.

Anyone could've thought it was going to be a decent day on the water. He would've thought so too at first blush, but he knew not to ever trust the ocean.

The coxswain turned the boat and sped parallel to the island, passing Madaket Beach. No sign of anyone in distress. But none of the men on that boat wanted to head back to the station without the absolute certainty they'd done all they could to ensure there was no one out in that water.

Cody shifted his gaze from the beach to the sea, scanning the vast ocean, looking for any sign of life.

Nothing.

His gut didn't usually steer him wrong. He was always ready for the tide to turn—on the water and in his life.

The coxswain opened the cabin door. "Head back to the station?"

"Go out a little further," Cody called back.

The man did as his XPO ordered, and Cody whispered a prayer. Same prayer he always whispered in these kinds of situations. "Lord, if I can save one soul, lead me to them now."

They cruised through the water, the wind tossing the forty-seven-foot boat around like a rag doll. They sped away from the shore, and Cody put the binoculars down, relying on his eyes to lead him to anyone who might be in danger.

His eyes, his gut, and the good Lord above. Those had always been his most trusted allies.

And maybe there was no one. Maybe this time his gut *had* steered him wrong.

“Nobody’s out here, sir,” a seaman named Jessup called out. “Wind’s getting nasty. We should head back.”

Cody planted his feet on the deck of the boat as water poured over the side. Nasty for them, yes, but deadly for someone in the water without a paddle.

Or maybe the paddle had floated away from somebody’s dock. Or maybe someone had already perished and they were too late.

As the next swell jolted the boat, the men at his side lost their balance, both reaching for the railing to steady themselves. Cody didn’t move an inch.

As the water lowered the boat back down, he spotted the faintest shock of red in the water up ahead. He lifted a hand, then turned to face the coxswain, who’d caught the same glimpse and now sped toward the object.

Could be nothing. But what if it wasn’t?

The red object had disappeared, and Cody took out the binoculars again and scanned the water. The white-capped waves dispersed, and there it was, only this time, Cody had the object in his sights. This time, it was clear that this was no piece of discarded plastic—it was a paddleboard, and there was a woman clinging to it.

The person on the beach had been right. There was someone in the water.

The coxswain maneuvered the boat closer to the woman, slowly—and Cody locked his gaze on her. When they were close enough, one of the men threw a flotation device. The woman reached for it, but a wave pushed the ring out of her reach.

“She looks tired,” Cody said, mostly to himself. How long had she been out here?

His heart kicked up a notch. He was trained for this, and yet there would always be a part of him that had to steady his own thoughts when it came to the ocean.

But then there would also always be a part of him that was filled

with rage when it came to these watery depths. A part that refused to let them win.

The seaman at his side tugged the flotation device in and tried again, but the brutal waves poured over the woman's head, and the weight of the water pulled her under. Her hand slipped off the paddleboard, and she struggled to hold on.

The woman went under again, and after another wave, only her paddleboard surfaced.

Cody hadn't been promoted to executive petty officer because he was impulsive. Quite the opposite. He was levelheaded. Calm in the face of danger. He prided himself on it.

Maybe it was Nantucket that had cast a spell on him, stealing away all the work he'd done these twelve years to overcome what the ocean had stolen from him. What other explanation could there be for his grabbing a pair of goggles and diving into the angry water, determined not to let this woman drown?

Determined not to let this ocean win.

He glided through the water, the strength of the storm doing little to slow him down. He'd trained for this. He lived for this. To keep the sea from stealing souls—that was the goal. And he didn't like to lose.

The water wasn't going to get this woman, no matter how remiss she'd been to go out without checking the forecast. *Not today, ocean. If you want her, you're gonna have to go through me.*

He grabbed the floater that was attached to the ship as the woman bobbed up out of the water a few yards away—possibly thrown out by an angry wave. She didn't appear to be swimming anymore. Cody barreled toward her, catching her under the arms as a wave pounded into both their bodies.

He held on to the life preserver as two seamen pulled them in. They reached the boat, and the men on the deck helped get them on board.

Quickly they sprang into action. Cody tore the goggles off his face and checked to see if she was breathing. Her body had gone limp and her pulse was faint.

“Let me help, sir,” one of the men said, and only then did Cody realize he was doing the job of the entire crew—something he’d likely have to answer for later.

He didn’t care. Maybe he had something to prove. Maybe it was *this* ocean and *this* island that needed to be reminded that it couldn’t beat him anymore.

One-two-three, he counted in his head as he administered rescue breaths. No response.

Not a great way to start out his sentence on Nantucket. Back after all these years only to lose one his first day out? That couldn’t happen.

He closed his mouth over hers again. *One-two-three*.

“We were too late,” one of the seamen said.

Cody shook his head, and just then the woman’s eyes opened, she coughed up a bucket of water, and he turned her over.

Another rescue boat pulled alongside theirs, and Cody’s entire body sighed in relief. *Thank you, God*.

The woman coughed again, then tried to sit up. She wasn’t small or frail—she was muscular and athletic, the kind of person who made activity a part of her daily life. Would she be ticked off to find out she’d required saving? Lots of women were these days.

But as she shifted and brought her intense blue eyes to his, it wasn’t anger or irritation he found there. It was recognition.

“Cody?”

He leaned back on his heels and studied her face—freckles that trailed across the bridge of her nose, hair darkened by the sea, and familiar eyes as bright as the sky.

“Louisa?” Her name escaped his lips, almost a whisper.

“You two know each other?” Jessup knelt beside him.

She hadn’t looked away since she’d said his name.

Was their entire history flashing through her mind too? Was she wondering where he’d been? Whom he’d loved? Why he was back? Why he never called? Did she want to know how he and his family had survived after they left the island? Or maybe, just maybe, she was thinking of that stupid pact they’d made all those years ago. Back

when things were simple and it seemed like there would never be a day they wouldn't be in each other's lives.

Of course, it was possible she was thinking none of those things. Maybe she was simply thinking that he was a jerk for saying the things he did.

She'd be right.

But there was a whole world she didn't understand, and he wasn't about to explain it to her. He stood.

Her eyes followed.

He didn't like it. He didn't like being watched. Being seen. Not by Louisa Chambers, anyway.

The crew of the other boat boarded their vessel and got to work. Soon Louisa would be headed for the hospital.

Once she was gone, Cody might be able to breathe again.