



*A Nantucket love story*

# What Matters Most

Courtney Walsh

*New York Times* bestselling author

Praise for Novels by  
COURTNEY WALSH



IS IT ANY WONDER

“[A] pleasing tale of lost love, forgiveness, and rekindled romance. . . . Walsh’s wholesome plot weaves faith elements nicely as Louisa relies on her faith to make sure all is finally made well. Walsh will please her fans and surely gain new ones with this excellent inspirational.”

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

“A story of forgiveness, hope, and enduring ties that proves it’s never too late for a second chance. . . . 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. . . . Lovable 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*

WHAT MATTERS MOST

ALSO BY COURTNEY WALSH

IS IT ANY WONDER

IF FOR ANY REASON

A MATCH MADE AT CHRISTMAS

JUST LOOK UP

JUST LET GO

JUST ONE KISS

JUST LIKE HOME

PAPER HEARTS

CHANGE OF HEART

THINGS LEFT UNSAID

HOMETOWN GIRL

A SWEETHAVEN SUMMER

A SWEETHAVEN HOMECOMING

A SWEETHAVEN CHRISTMAS

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# What Matters Most



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## CHAPTER ONE



THE LIST STUCK TO THE REFRIGERATOR was meant to motivate Emma Woodson, but in that moment, it seemed only to taunt. She stared at the words she'd scribbled in a rare moment of bravery and struggled not to roll her eyes at her own naiveté.

*The Year of Emma.*

The idea had come to her one night two months ago when her best friend, Elise, had shown up uninvited to force her to celebrate a birthday she very much did not feel like celebrating.

Turning thirty wasn't something to celebrate, after all. Not for Emma.

But try telling that to Elise. She was not the kind of person who would let a milestone birthday go unnoticed, which was why she dragged Emma out to a Mexican restaurant and forced her to wear a giant sombrero all the way through to dessert.

"What are you doing, Em?" she'd asked her in a tone that suggested a loaded question.

"You mean besides trying to find a way to set this hat on fire without burning the restaurant down?"

“I mean with your life,” Elise said.

Emma picked up her Coke and took a drink. “I’m surviving.” Barely.

“Don’t you think it’s time you stopped surviving?”

“And what, die?” Emma set her drink down. She knew what was coming, and she wasn’t interested. She didn’t want to hear about how she was wasting her life. Not today. She already knew—she didn’t need the reminder.

“No,” Elise said. “You’re practically coding and you’re calling that a life. Enough’s enough already.”

It was easy for Elise to say. Her life was nearly perfect. She’d married Teddy, the love of her life, at twenty-three, had a baby at twenty-five on her first try, another baby at twenty-seven, also on her first try, and now she stayed home with her kids in the big, beautiful home funded by her husband’s new job in private security.

Elise didn’t understand Emma’s circumstances, no matter how empathetic she was.

Elise pulled a notebook out of her purse and wrote in block letters: *THE YEAR OF EMMA*. She turned it around and slid it across the table.

“What’s this?”

“Tonight we declare that this is the year everything changes for you,” Elise said. “And we’re putting it in writing.”

Emma frowned. “My life is fine.”

But Elise’s sardonic laugh told the truth. “Em, when was the last time you did something for yourself? Or something just for fun? You work in a job you hate. You hardly sleep. Most days I don’t even think you eat. And you never smile anymore.”

The waiter returned with fried ice cream, and Emma’s memory drifted back to the last birthday she’d spent with Cam. He’d made her a three-layer strawberry cake from scratch. As he presented it to her, the top tier slid right off the plate and onto the floor. He’d been disappointed at first, but the whole adorable scene struck Emma as so funny it took her a solid three minutes to stop laughing.

Was that the last time she'd smiled?

Elise took a bite of ice cream. "So here's the deal. You make a list of all the things you want to do to remind yourself you're still alive. You've been avoiding living—you know that, right?"

Emma jabbed her spoon into the ice cream, crunching through the outside layer. "So you've said."

"Sorry," Elise said. "It's worth repeating."

"I'm doing the best I can." She took a bite and avoided Elise's gaze. Because they both knew it was a lie, and Elise wouldn't let it slide.

Now, as she stood in the kitchen of the small Nantucket cottage, surrounded by unpacked boxes, she scanned the list one last time before heading out the door.

*Find a job I actually like* was number five on the list, and today was the day she hoped to cross it off. She glanced at the clock, and a sudden wave of nausea rolled through her stomach. She'd been working as a waitress the last few years, but this job—in an actual art gallery, a reputable, high-end gallery—would give her a chance to work in the field she'd always wanted to work in. Before she let her dreams become a distant memory.

First, she had to make it to the interview on time.

"CJ?" she called out. "You ready?"

She walked into the living room, where her five-year-old son stood, looking out the window. "There's a man out there."

Emma came up behind CJ and followed his gaze to the sidewalk, where a man approached the house. He had a duffel slung over his shoulder. "Oh! Probably answering the ad." Bad timing. She'd have to give him a rush tour of the apartment if she was going to drop CJ at day care and make it to the interview on time.

"You ready?" She took her son's hand and pulled him toward the front door. She opened it and waved at the man on the sidewalk. "Hey there!"

He met her eyes and stopped moving.

"You must be here about the ad." She pulled CJ down the stairs and toward the sidewalk. "I'm actually relieved. I was starting to think

nobody was going to respond to it.” She gave him a once-over. He was probably a year or two older than she was and rugged-looking, like Bear Grylls but with disobedient hair, the kind of disheveled that said, *I’m not trying very hard*.

It suited him. Emma had no interest in dating, but if she did, he would’ve probably been the kind of guy that would’ve captured her attention.

His bright hazel eyes alone seemed worth exploring.

“I’m kind of in a hurry.” She forced herself to maintain her composure. “But I can run you up there quick to take a look?”

He almost appeared confused for a second. He glanced at CJ, who was staring at him—this stranger—and then back at Emma. “Okay.”

“CJ, go sit on the porch, okay? We’ll leave in just a minute.”

Her son did as he was told. Emma took her keys from her bag and motioned for the man to follow her.

“The apartment is above the garage,” she said. “It’s nothing fancy, and it needs some work, but I suppose that’s where you’d come in.” She didn’t look at him, but she knew he was following close behind as they walked up the steps to the apartment. Cam’s apartment. He’d spent his summers in the cottage with his grandparents when he was a kid, and when he got older, they converted it into his space.

He’d always talked about turning it into a rental. It had been a dream, really. He said it would be a good extra income, but Emma had always suspected it was more than that. Cam wanted to share Nantucket with as many people as he could.

When she opened that door, the memory of her late husband would be waiting for her.

She’d had most of Cam’s things shipped here after he died—it had always been her plan to move here once she was back on her feet. She just didn’t expect that it would take five years, which was how long Cam’s belongings had been sitting here.

Still in boxes. She couldn’t bear to face it then, and she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to face it now.

“I hope you have a good imagination.” She stuck the key in the lock and glanced over her shoulder at the man. “It’s a work in progress.”

She pushed open the door, struck by the musty smell of an abandoned space that had been locked up and forgotten about, which was exactly what it was.

She really should’ve assessed the state of the apartment before placing that ad, but she hadn’t found the courage. Now she took a step inside. A label on the box in the corner drew her attention. *Cam’s stuff* was written in bold black marker in his handwriting. She hadn’t seen his handwriting in so long.

The sight of it sent her pulse racing. She flipped the light on and looked at the man. “You can look around. I’ll just wait outside.”

She stepped out onto the deck and forced herself to breathe.

*Calm down, Emma.* She spotted CJ rolling a truck down the length of the porch. “I know it looks bad,” she called through the doorway. “But that’s why the rent is included. I figured I can’t really pay much for someone to clean it out and get it ready for renters, but I can offer a free place to stay. It just might take a day or two to make it livable.”

The man reappeared in the doorway. “So the rent’s included?”

She frowned. Hadn’t he read the ad? “Yes. In exchange for cleaning out the apartment and getting it ready to rent. I’ve got a list of things that need to be done—painting, cleaning, repairs. It’s mostly cosmetic, but who knows what you’ll find once you start?”

Truthfully, she’d made that list based on assumptions. She had no idea the condition of Cam’s apartment.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay, you’ll do it?”

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and studied her for a beat longer than she expected. She looked away.

“Yeah, I’ll do it.”

She turned to him and smiled. “Oh, good. Honestly, I was getting worried. I placed the ad two weeks ago, and nobody’s even been by to look at it.” Did she sound as desperate as she felt?

“Don’t you need some references?” he asked. “Or at least my name?”

He was almost smiling. He was handsome. Maybe a little too handsome, with sandy-colored hair on the dark side of blond. A few days of growth on his face—he wore it well. Cam’s face was always clean-shaven, and his hair was always military short.

“Ma’am?”

She realized she hadn’t answered his question. That he was still considering taking this job was something of a miracle. “Sorry. Yes, I should probably get both. Your name and your references.”

“Jameson Shaw.” He extended his hand toward her, and she took it. “But most people call me Jamie.”

She looked down at his hand, wrapped around her own. It was nothing, just a handshake, and yet she was so keenly aware of his touch it felt like something more. “Emma Woodson.” She pulled her hand from his and pressed her palm against her leg.

“Can I drop my references off to you later? I don’t have them on me.”

“Of course,” she said, though it was slightly irresponsible of him to apply for a job with no references. The thought reminded her that she had a job interview of her own, and if she didn’t hurry, she’d be the irresponsible one. “I’m sorry. I really should get going. You can stop back later this evening with your references if that works for you?”

He started to say something but seemed to change his mind as the words were coming out of his mouth. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

I've been carrying this novel around in my head and my heart for a very, very long time. In fact, it was one of the first ideas I ever had, but the timing never quite worked out for me to write it. I'm so very thankful that changed.

Emma and Jamie's story is a rare one, one that poured straight out of me so fast I don't think I could've stopped it. It was the kind of story that felt like a gift from God, like he cracked open my skull and dropped it inside. Not all books are like that. Most, in fact, are not. More often, there is a lot of angst, a lot of toiling, a lot of frustration, a lot of my husband asking, "How much longer until you turn this book in?"

But this one, for whatever reason, just made sense to me from the start. The characters jumped out of my head and onto the page, and I felt every bit of what they felt. Their pain, their elation, their joy, their hope, their shame. All of it. It all made sense to me.

Maybe because these are universal emotions. Maybe our need to be forgiven and our need to forgive other people burrows down so deep that we feel it on a soul level. Both of the main characters in this story were dealing with this in one way or another, and I really enjoyed the chance to explore this theme through their stories.

Writing is an escape for me. There's nothing like getting lost in

another world, especially on the days when the real world feels a little too dark. I truly hope you find my books to be a source of light and hope in your life.

I would absolutely love to have you join my Facebook group, Courtney Walsh's Reader Room, or follow me on Instagram (@courtneywalsh), where I spend far too much time! And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter via my website, courtneywalshwrites.com, for all the latest news. I'd love to stay connected and I love to make new friends. I've been writing now for a handful of years, and I can honestly say that my readers are some of the very best people in the world.

I truly hope you enjoyed reading *What Matters Most* as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you so much for taking the time to read it. It means the world to me. I'm so, so thankful to you for being a part of my journey, for allowing me to share my stories with you, and for making my days brighter and so much more fun.

*Courtney*