

A person is lying on their back on a beach, wearing a red top and a wide-brimmed hat. They are resting on a red and white striped towel. In the background, there is a sandy beach, the ocean with white waves, and a yellow and white striped beach umbrella. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

*A Nantucket love story*

# If for Any Reason

**Courtney Walsh**

*New York Times* bestselling author

Praise for Novels by  
COURTNEY WALSH



IF FOR ANY REASON

“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.”

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## 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. . . . 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*

**A L S O   B Y   C O U R T N E Y   W A L S H**

JUST LOOK UP

JUST LET GO

PAPER HEARTS

CHANGE OF HEART

THINGS LEFT UNSAID

HOMETOWN GIRL

A SWEETHAVEN SUMMER

A SWEETHAVEN HOMECOMING

A SWEETHAVEN CHRISTMAS



Courtney Walsh

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## PROLOGUE



*Dear Emily,*

*As I write this, you are approximately six days, three hours, and thirty-two minutes old. We've been home from the hospital for four days, and I haven't been able to stop looking at you the entire time. You sleep in a bassinet next to my bed, and I lie awake at night, listening to you breathe.*

*To be honest, listening to you breathe is all I do. I feel like it's my sole responsibility to make sure that continues. It's a little scary, if I'm honest. And I'm always honest. You see, you came as a bit of a surprise to me, and I guess that's why I've been so nervous lately, in the days leading up to your birth. Because I don't want to mess anything up.*

*I don't want to mess you up.*

*People always talk about how wonderful it is to have a baby, but no one ever talks about how terrifying it is too. You see, I'm a little bit terrified, and I'm not sure who else to tell. I'm pretty sure my mother would use that fear against me somehow, so I'll only share it with you, my little girl.*

*I'll share it because I want you to know that sometimes we have to do things that are scary in order to get to something good. Sometimes the hardest things we're faced with bring us the best results. It's strange how that works, but it's true.*

*You're probably wondering why I'm writing you a letter when I could just pick you up and tell you this in person.*

*Well, I've always wondered about my own childhood. I remember once sitting on the floor of my friend Samantha's bedroom, looking at her baby book. It was a scrapbook, I guess, and her mom had written all kinds of funny stories about Samantha from the time she was a baby and stuck them down next to photos of her at every stage of life. My mom isn't the sentimental type, so I never had a book of stories. I don't know what she was thinking about anything, and I wish I did. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so alone.*

*I'm not the crafty type, so I decided letters were more the way to go. Lessons I've learned along the way and want to pass on to you. Love letters to my little girl. I'll put them all together in a book and keep it for you. And if for any reason I can't tell you these important lessons in person, you'll still have my words, so you'll never have to wonder what I would say.*

*I won't waste time on silly or frivolous lessons, only the ones that mean the most to me, so if this book falls into your hands, I hope you'll give it the attention it deserves.*

*I'm not a wise woman. Most people wouldn't call me a woman at all, not yet anyway . . . but I'm learning so many things about myself, and bringing another person into the world has made me grow up fast. I want to be the best mom I can for you, Emily. It's you and me against the world.*

*And you know what? I'm terrified. But I'm going to do the very best job I can. I know I'll make mistakes, but hopefully you'll forgive me. I never knew how much love I had to give until I held you in my arms.*

*And PS—I'll do my best to keep Alan and Eliza off your back . . . mostly I'm guessing they'll want to stay on mine!*

*Love you so much,  
Mom (It's so weird to write that!)*

## CHAPTER 1



EMILY ACKERMAN HUMMED WHEN SHE WAS NERVOUS. No particular song, just whatever melody popped into her head. At that moment, it was the Harry Connick Jr. version of “It Had to Be You,” the one in the old movie *When Harry Met Sally*. Her mom’s favorite.

The bouncy melody danced around her mind as she closed her eyes and pretended she was anywhere but on the ferry from Hyannis to Nantucket. She made her living pretending, and she’d traveled the globe for the last ten years—why was this so hard?

She leaned her head back, thinking only of the song—of Harry’s smooth, sultry voice—but instead of going blank, her mind wrapped itself around a memory. Her mother, dancing on “their” beach, singing “It Had to Be You” at the top of her lungs while Emily dug her feet in the cool sand and giggled at her silliness.

Emily opened her eyes and found a little boy with dark hair and big brown eyes staring at her.

“You’re loud,” he said.

“Andrew, that’s not polite.” The boy’s mother wrapped an arm

around him and pulled him closer. "I'm so sorry. We're working on manners."

Emily smiled at him. "Sorry. Sometimes I get lost in my own world."

"Me too," Andrew said. "I have an imaginary friend named Kenton."

Emily widened her eyes. "I had an imaginary friend when I was little!" She tried to sound more excited than she felt. She was an actress. It wasn't that hard.

And yet, for some reason, it left her feeling hollow.

"Mom says people will think I'm out of my mind if I keep talking to myself."

Andrew's mother gave him a squeeze. "Andrew, let's leave the nice lady alone."

*Lady?* Emily knew the other side of thirty was a downhill slope, but when people started calling you "lady," you might as well sign up for AARP.

"I'm Andrew," the boy said. Then he looked at his mother and blinked. "See? That's manners." Then back to Emily. "Now you tell me your name."

"I'm Emily."

"Mom says I'm not supposed to call grown-ups by their first name."

"Oh." Emily glanced at the boy's mother, whose expression was a cross between amused and apologetic. "I guess you can call me Miss Ackerman."

"Miss Ackerman," Andrew said. "Nice to meet you."

Emily decided she liked this boy. She hoped he didn't lose his charm as he got older, and she hoped even more that he remained genuine. So many men she'd known were the exact opposite. Not a single one worth holding on to.

Especially not Max, who, she was convinced, had never told her one honest thing the entire time they were together. Not that it mattered really. Emily's rules were set up to protect her from getting too attached. She'd never stick around long enough to find out if a man's

motives were impure—three months and she was off. Max had taken their breakup harder than she'd expected. He'd actually cried.

Ugh. The memory of it made her feel like such a jerk.

Emily exhaled. She'd been doing so well. Why did she have to go and think about Max?

The regret wound its way back in, and she could feel her cheeks flush at the memory of him. Maybe he'd actually loved her? Maybe she should've given him more of a chance?

But no. She'd taken Mom's advice to heart, as she did in all things, but especially about this. Her mother knew something about heartache, after all.

*Be passionate in other areas, but in matters of the heart, be mindful to use caution. Your heart isn't something to give freely and without thought. It should be protected at all costs so you can ensure your whole world doesn't come crashing down around you. Hear me on this, Emily. I know what I'm talking about.*

Without thinking, Emily slid her hand inside her bag until it found the soft, worn cover of the book of letters. In all her travels, it was the one thing she always made sure to keep close.

While Emily didn't know all the details, she knew that Isabelle Ackerman had suffered a great heartache. She only wished her mother had gotten a bit of closure before she died.

The letters were unspecific about so many things, but this was not one of them. This was not an area where she had to wonder what her mom would say—Isabelle had found a way to get her message to her only daughter, and Emily had fully embraced it.

She'd kept her heart safe. When someone got too close—and they did sometimes—she knew it was time to run. Also time to run when she could feel herself liking someone too much, which was what had happened with Max. He was charming and handsome and wealthy, and Emily knew if she hadn't been careful, she could've convinced herself he was worth a little rule breaking.

Thank goodness she wised up before there was permanent damage to her heart.

She had enough damage to deal with, and sadly, none of that could be blamed on Max or anyone else. It had been her own stupid mistakes that had landed her here—penniless and reeling. She hated the way this felt.

An utter failure. That's what she was.

When she'd finished writing her play, she'd been so confident in it. She'd seen so much potential, and nothing could've dissuaded her—not even the rejections from several big-name directors who wanted nothing to do with the project. They'd left her no choice but to produce and direct it on her own.

She should've listened. She should've started small. She didn't. Instead, she sank everything she had into the show.

She'd given all her blood, sweat, and tears to her work—and yes, most of what was left of her trust fund. So when the play opened to terrible reviews (“*A meandering disaster that doesn't know what it's trying to be*”) and folded in two weeks' time, she was left with nothing but people to pay and a humiliating professional failure.

She'd bet on the wrong horse, so to speak. The show had so much promise—she'd been so sure it would be a huge hit. She'd been so wrong.

Worse, everyone in the theatre world now knew that she was a failure—there was a huge article about it in *Backstage* magazine. A cautionary tale of sorts.

“Former Child Star's Directorial Debut Is This Year's Worst.”

At least she could take comfort in the fact that her grandparents didn't read *Backstage*.

She supposed it was the one blessing in GrandPop's dying when he did. He never found out she'd lost everything with her poor business decisions or her short-lived creative endeavors. He'd never known just how incompetent his granddaughter was, even after years of watching him make millions with his savvy business sense.

But that was over now. Now, sitting on the ferry next to her new

best friend, Andrew, Emily screwed her eyes shut and willed herself to stop thinking about Max, her failures, her grandparents, and her empty bank account.

She wasn't sure which of those things would be most difficult to put out of her head. All of them seemed to have her attention at any given point of the day. She supposed that's what happened when you hit rock bottom. You wasted a lot of time replaying your mistakes, trying to figure out if there was any way to undo them in order to right your own ship.

So far, she'd found no indication such a solution existed. She only knew that when you found yourself at rock bottom, it would be nice to see a hand offering to pull you up.

For her, there was no hand, and that was maybe the worst part of all.

"You're humming again." It was Andrew. Earnest Andrew and his big brown eyes.

"Don't grow up to be a jerk, okay, Andrew?" Emily said absently. Andrew's mother frowned.

"Sorry," Emily said. "Sometimes I say inappropriate things."

"Kenton does that too. One time he spent the whole day talking about poo." Andrew's face was so serious Emily couldn't help but laugh.

He smiled at her. "What's your imaginary friend's name?"

"I don't see much of her anymore," Emily said. "But her name was Kellen."

"Kellen," Andrew said. "Kellen and Kenton. I bet they're friends."

"You ask him the next time you see him, okay?" Emily smiled. She'd been having such a lovely time with Andrew she didn't even notice the ferry had slowed and was now docking in Nantucket.

If she closed her eyes tightly enough, Emily could almost imagine she was just another Nantucket tourist. If she stopped her mind from wandering, she could almost believe it was her first time on the island, her first time seeing in real life what she'd only seen in photos—the cobblestone streets, the gray Shaker homes with big bushes of purplish-blue hydrangeas out front, the rows of brightly

colored Vespas for rent, the lighthouses that beckoned weary travelers to come and rest here.

Nantucket made promises, but in her experience, the island didn't make good on them.

What she wouldn't give for this to be her first time.

But it wasn't, was it?

She glanced into her big, floppy bag, the one where she'd stuffed all the necessities, including the haphazardly assembled book of letters, worn with years of handling. Sometimes just touching it was enough to make her mother feel close, almost like she had a magic lamp she could rub and see her wishes come true.

But as she placed her hand on the tattered, hand-decorated cover, even her mom felt far away.

It was as if her presence had been pulled out of the book the second the island came into view. As if even her mother's memory wanted to forget.

All around her, other passengers were gathering their things, anxious to get the season started on the island. But Emily stayed in her seat, dazed and maybe kind of motion sick. Or perhaps the nausea had nothing to do with the boat ride at all.

If she were smart, she would've approached Nantucket the way she would a two-day-old Band-Aid.

One quick rip and it would all be over.

If only . . .

"You're getting off, aren't you?" Andrew stood in front of her now, his red-and-yellow tiny-person backpack wrapped around both of his shoulders, a red baseball cap doing its best to tame his unruly chocolate-colored hair.

"I'm thinking about it," Emily said with a smile.

"You like it here, don't you?"

Ooh. A trick question. What was she going to tell the kid? That this island had stolen everything from her and she was only back here because she had absolutely no other option? His mother would probably call the police.



“Yes, it’s very lovely,” she finally said. It wasn’t a lie, not really. Nantucket *was* lovely. At least it was for other people.

“I love this place,” Andrew said. “Here.” He held out his fist and gave it a shake.

She held her hand out underneath his and he dropped a smooth white rock into it.

“I found this on the beach last summer.” Andrew grinned and she could tell his front tooth was about to fall out. “You can have it.”

Before she could protest, Andrew’s mom gave his hand a tug.

He looked back at her and waved, and for the briefest second Emily’s heart ached.

His mom was, quite possibly, younger than Emily. And she had that beautiful little boy and probably a devoted husband waiting for her somewhere. That life had never appealed to Emily, but in that moment—and it was a fleeting one—something tugged at her insides.

But Emily didn’t have time for heartache when she was about to get off the ferry. She grabbed her suitcase, her purse, and the large bag she’d stuffed with toiletries, Kind bars (to keep from eating junk), dark chocolate-covered blueberries (because sometimes it was okay to eat junk), two books, and anything else that hadn’t fit in her suitcase.

She made her way to the door of the ferry and drew in a deep, deep breath.

*I can do hard things.*

She’d tossed the mantra around in her head for so many months, the words were meaningless by now. Well, they were pretty much already meaningless because once a phrase caught on and became popular, it lost its value. Every fitness expert in America probably shouted those words out as they reached the fourteenth rep of a particularly challenging exercise.

But she *could* do hard things. She’d been doing hard things since she was eleven years old.

Emily stood at the edge of the island and took another salt-tinged

breath, the faint smell of fish reminding her that not everything near the ocean was lovely. Certainly not.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and willed herself to press onward. She hadn't come this far to chicken out now, and besides, what other choice did she have?

Sometimes she wished Nantucket hadn't been ruined for her. Just another complaint to add to the pile, she supposed. If she wasn't careful, she'd rack up so many she'd become one of those cranky old women whose mouths were permanently frowning, like that cartoon character, Maxine, on the Hallmark cards.

Or her own grandmother.

But no, that would never be her. Not Emily Ackerman. Not the girl who looked for fun wherever she went (and usually found it). Not the free-spirited wanderer who'd worked acting jobs all over the world, had more friends than she could keep track of, and knew exactly how to turn every trip into an adventure.

This was just another trip, right? Never mind that this trip had a purpose other than fun. This trip was her second chance—and she could not screw it up.

That certainly put a damper on any plans for a good time.

She dragged her single suitcase behind her, aware how pathetic it was that at the age of thirty-one, she could fit nearly everything important to her in one suitcase—and it wasn't even the largest one in the set her grandmother had sent when she graduated from college nine years ago.

She heaved a sigh and moved with the flow of foot traffic as tourists flooded off the ferry and onto the street. When she was a girl, this was the moment she looked forward to all year long—the moment her flip-flops hit the cobblestones, the moment she and her mom arrived in Nantucket.

So much had changed.

As she watched Andrew's red-and-yellow backpack disappear into the crowd, she said a quick prayer that his days in Nantucket were filled with nothing but good things—lobster boils and fish fries, giant

ice cream cones from the Juice Bar and long, sun-kissed days at Jetties Beach.

She wished for him all the things she would've held on to if Nantucket hadn't been ruined for her all those years ago.

And suddenly, she wasn't so sure she actually could do hard things. But she was about to find out.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

IT'S AMAZING TO ME to think about the journey I've been on as I wrote this book. When I first started brainstorming the idea for *If for Any Reason*, I had no clue what was about to happen. You see, it seemed like a charming plan to write a book full of letters from a mother to a daughter. Who could've guessed that as I was writing it, my own daughter would be diagnosed with thyroid cancer, sending me on the kind of journey no mother ever really wants to take.

I admit I didn't pick up this manuscript for a full month, maybe even two, after Sophia's diagnosis. It was too hard to write these letters—letters full of wisdom from a mother to a daughter. How I wanted to impart wisdom to my own girl, but I simply felt unworthy. I didn't know how to help her deal with the kind of diagnosis nobody ever wants to get, especially at the age of seventeen.

But as is always the case, the writing helped me through. It seems I'm unable to think or feel anything unless I'm processing it through the written word.

More than once, this book had me in tears as I contemplated the lessons and thoughts and dreams and ideas I most wanted to communicate to my own daughter. More than once I had to delete letters simply because they made no sense in Emily's story . . . because they were written to be a part of mine.

I suppose you could say that this book has become tremendously important to me, carrying me through the most difficult season of my life thus far. It accompanied me on that journey, helped me weather that storm, gave me a much-needed distraction, and inadvertently reminded me how very precious life is—not because of what we do or what we own but because of the people who make every day so much richer.

I'm so thankful for Vanessa Reyes, a scrapbooker who, years ago, created a small album full of letters for her daughters—letters that would serve as their connection to her *if for any reason* she was no longer there. It stuck with me and inspired me to write my own letters and, eventually, this novel.

I sincerely hope you enjoyed Emily and Hollis's story, and I would *love* to know what you thought of it. I truly love to hear from my readers, especially when I get to know you a little better! I invite you to stay in touch by signing up for my newsletter on my website, [www.courtneywalshwrites.com](http://www.courtneywalshwrites.com), or by dropping me a line via e-mail: [courtney@courtneywalshwrites.com](mailto:courtney@courtneywalshwrites.com).

With love and gratitude to you,  
*Courtney*