

EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSIE

An illustration of a theater stage. In the center, a woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a yellow polo shirt and dark blue pants, sits cross-legged on a wooden floor. To her left, an older man with glasses, wearing a white shirt and a dark vest, stands with a cane and holds a yellow folder. To her right, a man in a blue shirt and dark pants stands on a silver step ladder, reaching up towards the top of the title. The background is a dark purple curtain with several yellow and pink stars hanging from above. On the floor to the left of the woman is a water bottle and a rolled-up script. To the right is a small white sign that says "A NOVEL".

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COURTNEY WALSH

Praise for Courtney Walsh

“This sweet, slice-of-life romance from Walsh (*The Happy Life of Isadora Bentley*) kicks off when overworked associate book editor Kelsey Worthington is hit by a curb-hopping car and taken to the hospital, where she meets Georgina Tate, the formidable owner of Tate Cosmetics . . . Walsh delivers just enough introspection to make her heroines’ journeys believable without slowing the pace. The romance, when it comes, is gentle and sincere rather than steamy. Readers looking for G-rated love stories will want to snap this up.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Courtney Walsh is an incredible storyteller. She has a magical way of weaving hope and happiness into every story she writes. If you love books by Denise Hunter and Rachel Linden, then say yes to *The Summer of Yes!*”

—MELISSA FERGUSON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *How to Plot a Payback*

“Two unlikely women come together for a summer that will change their lives in Courtney Walsh’s latest perfect page-turner. Full of heart, humor, and, oh yes, a happy ending, *The Summer of Yes* reaffirms why Walsh is one of my favorite writers. This feel-good novel is her absolute best yet—and the beach read that everyone will be talking about!”

—KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY, *New York Times* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *A Happier Life*

Also by Courtney Walsh

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The Happy Life of Isadora Bentley
Things Left Unsaid
Hometown Girl
Merry Ex-Mas

ROAD TRIP ROMANCES

A Cross-Country Christmas
A Cross-Country Wedding

NANTUCKET LOVE STORIES

If for Any Reason
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A Match Made at Christmas
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HARBOR POINTE NOVELS

Just Look Up
Just Let Go
Just One Kiss
Just Like Home

PAPER HEARTS NOVELS

Paper Hearts
Change of Heart

SWEETHAVEN CIRCLE NOVELS

A Sweethaven Summer
A Sweethaven Homecoming
A Sweethaven Christmas
A Sweethaven Romance (a novella)

EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSIE

A NOVEL

Courtney Walsh



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Everything's Coming Up Rosie

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*For Professor Alan Langdon,
Seeker of Joy,
Proof that length of time spent with a person does not
determine the impact on a life*



PROLOGUE

WELL, SHOOT. THIS ISN'T HOW my life is supposed to go.

On the day I graduated from Northwestern with a BA in musical theatre, diploma in hand and stars in my eyes, I told myself I wouldn't give up until I made my dream come true.

I also pledged never to do Amish theatre, but as it turns out, it pays really well. Beggars can't choose and all that.

Back then, in those idealistic years postgraduation and pre-real world, I turned up my nose at the idea of a plan B because "they" said that if I had a plan B, I'd be more likely to use it. And I didn't want to use it. Because I was going to make it.

I held my future in my own two hands, which meant, according to Eleanor Roosevelt and Timbuk 3, that the future belonged to me and I needed to have a pair of shades ready.

It all seems so naive now.

It's amazing how seven years can change everything. Seven years of auditions, callbacks, rejections. Seven years of temp jobs and ushering patrons to their seats and getting very good at making fancy coffee drinks. Seven years of what is starting to feel like wasted time.

I randomly think how change must be way faster for dogs.

I'm glad I don't have a dog. If I did, that would mean that both of us were about to become homeless.

Because today, standing in the hallway of my soon-to-be-ex

three-story walk-up in Brooklyn, I mindlessly wonder if someone is trying to tell me that dreams like mine are for fools.

There's a yellow envelope stuck to the front door and a suitcase—my suitcase—propped in the corner of the hallway.

I stare at the envelope, and the envelope stares right back.

I groan. This is not my day. Apparently this isn't my year either.

After months, the play I've been rehearsing finally opened in a tiny black box theatre in the Village. Yes, it was an original, but the playwright had some other successes and the script wasn't half bad.

It seemed the critics solely focused on the part of the script that wasn't half good.

They hated it. One of them wrote, "The redhead playing Julietta couldn't be more wrong for the role. Her stilted delivery and understated reactions reminded me of the time I made the mistake of letting artificial intelligence try to narrate a book for me. This calls into question the ability of this director—everyone knows if you get the cast wrong, you get the whole show wrong."

What I took away from that review, of course, is that *I* ruined the whole show. The miscast redhead playing Julietta was me. Never mind that the director actually *wanted* the stilted delivery and understated reactions. That I did what I'd been directed to do.

The show closed after only two performances.

I huff as I open the envelope that someone—I'm assuming one of my roommates, Ellen, whose name is on the lease—taped there. I pull out a handwritten note telling me she's found someone else to rent my room. Someone who can pay.

This is not unexpected.

The timing is better this way since you're heading home tonight for that baby shower, but I've given up ever seeing the last four months' rent from you. I packed your things to make it easier because Trinity is

moving in tonight. I'm sorry this didn't work out, and I really do wish you luck, Rosie.

Ellen

I crumple the paper and throw it on the floor. Then I rush over, pick it up, and try to smooth it out. I'm angry, but I don't want to have anyone else *see* I'm angry. I stuff the paper into my bag, grab my suitcase, and head downstairs, the whole time thinking, *So this is what rock bottom feels like.*

If this isn't rock bottom, it's rock-bottom adjacent.

And now, I'm going home.

Home. For the first time in years.

Home. To reunite with all of my old high school friends, the same people who voted me Best Actress and Bravest Grad for the senior class. Never mind I've done a terrible job of staying in touch.

Home. To desperately try to hide the truth. There's no way I'm letting people see that I'm a failure.

I'm an actor.

Time for the role of my life.

CHAPTER 1

I HAVE THAT FEELING YOU get when you're next in line for a roller coaster.

A little bouncy, a little anxious, and so excited that I might wet my pants.

"Rosie?! I can't believe you're actually here!"

My best friends, Taylor, Marnie, and Maya, all rush toward me, and for a few moments it's like the rest of the room fades away. I'm seventeen again, getting ready for homecoming with the three people I love most in the world, aside from my family. We all try to talk at the same time, succeed for a solid thirty seconds, and then stop and laugh.

It's like we never left each other and all of my hesitation about being here melts away.

Our friend group is a sitcom.

Taylor—the chipper one. Class president. Head cheerleader. Currently pregnant.

Marnie—the studious one. Speech team champion and National Merit Scholar. Currently crushing it as the anchor for the local news.

Maya—the wild one. Rebellious party girl who hid her intelligence behind blue hair and piercings, both of which, I now see, are gone, making her currently look beautiful and grown-up.

I step back and look at Taylor's belly. My gorgeous friend is tiny, so the baby bump looks like someone stuck a basketball to her

midsection.

My hand hovers over it. “Can I . . . ?”

Taylor takes my hand and pulls it toward her belly. “Of course! All aunties have full access.”

Maya and Marnie and I each put a hand on Taylor’s stomach, like the last ones to leave wins the car, and I grin. It’s been too long since I saw them, too long since I’ve been home, too long for all the things. I’m so out of the loop, and I swear to myself not to let it happen again.

“Taylor, honey, come say hi to your Aunt Janet!” Taylor’s mom gives us a wave, then ushers her daughter to the opposite side of the room.

“Where do I put this?” I give the card I brought a little shake.

“Oh! Over here,” Maya says. “And make sure to sign the guest book.”

I set the envelope down, grateful my mom offered to go in on a gift card together. It’s impersonal, and I do plan to buy something for the baby once she arrives, but right now, I just can’t swing anything extra. The Cheez-Its I bought at the airport just about did me in.

Thankfully the Bank of Mom doesn’t charge interest.

“So you’re doing a movie?” Marnie asks, a wide smile on her face.

“And you work in a Broadway theatre?” Maya grins. “Oh my gosh, you have the best life.”

They each loop an arm through mine and lead me we’re-off-to-see-the-Wizard style, over to an empty table.

“Oh yeah, things are good,” I say brightly as we sit. “I mean, I don’t know about ‘the best life,’ but . . . it’s good. It’s, you know, different every day. It definitely has its challenges.”

I don’t want to lie to them.

But I also don’t want to tell them the whole truth.

“Have you met anyone famous?” Maya asks. “Please tell me you

know Timothée Chalamet.”

“Better yet, please tell us you’re *dating* Timothée Chalamet.”

I look around for some water. My throat is dry. “Sadly, no. He’s . . . uh . . . in a bit of a different . . . league than I am.”

“Okay, so tell us all your news,” Marnie says.

“Is there water?” I ask. You’d think being an actor would make these kinds of situations easier, but I’ve always been better with a script to memorize. “Actually, I’m going to run to the bathroom quickly.”

“You okay?”

I wave Maya off in what I hope is a nonchalant tone. “Yeah, I just feel like I’m still on the plane.” I swallow and wince. “Motion sickness or something . . .” My voice trails off as I set out to find the restroom.

I can’t keep this up, of course, but how do I tell them the truth? They want all the details of what’s supposed to be—but absolutely isn’t—an exciting life.

After college, I booked a few jobs right away. I got a small role in a cop show filming in Chicago before I even graduated, and I took it as a sign that yes, I was on the right track. After that, I joined the national tour of *Oklahoma!*, which closed after only a month and a half, thanks to the director’s odd, dark, and very disconcerting burlesque interpretation of the classic. And even though I was only in the ensemble, a part of me knew it wasn’t a good production, but it was a job, and that meant that I was *making it*.

That all changed really fast. Like a carp in the desert . . . things dried up.

And every time I’m about ready to quit in favor of a more stable job that actually pays the bills, I’ll book something small—a one-liner in a TV show, or a walk-on role in a movie, or a named part in a small, experimental play that’s being produced off-off-off-Broadway. Like so far off it’s in Ohio.

Those are the dangling carrots that keep me stretching my

neck out and biting for more, even though I'm beginning to regret all of my life choices.

I look at my reflection in the mirror, aware that this baby shower might require the most acting of anything I've done in the last seven years. This is Taylor's day. I'm not going to ruin it. I've gotten very good at keeping any uncomfortable feelings to myself.

Depressed loser is not a role I want to play.

I splash cold water on my cheeks, then pat them dry. "You can do this," I whisper to my reflection, wishing for the ten thousandth time that I didn't have freckles.

Would I book more jobs if I didn't have freckles?

"Rosie Waterman? I can't believe you're here!"

I turn and see Ireland Abbot standing in the bathroom behind me. She must've slithered in when I wasn't looking.

Taylor and Maya were the more popular ones in our group, and unlike in all the teen movies, they didn't ditch Marnie or me when we got into high school. We became an eclectic foursome that had each other's backs.

But that didn't mean everyone else understood our friendship. More than once, Ireland had humiliated me in high school, and more than once, she tried to convince Taylor that I was ruining her social status.

Mean girls don't always outgrow their meanness, it seems.

"Hi, Ireland." I smile at her through the reflection in the mirror as I avoid looking at my own eyes. She looks great, darn it.

I know I'm not classically beautiful. I often rely on my wit to set me apart. I decided I could make a go of this acting thing if I was fun and funny and interesting to look at, but standing next to Ireland, I feel less *interesting* and more *rough and ready*.

"I keep waiting for another update about your big, fancy acting career." Ireland moves to the sink next to mine and admires herself in the mirror.

Our eyes meet in the glass, and I paint on a smile. I feel heat rise,

and I try hard not to use my years of improv to roast her here in the ladies' bathroom.

"I'm just living my life," I say. "I don't see the need to report home every time I book a job. That would get tedious." I laugh to try and cover my annoyance, but I'm sure it doesn't work. I flip on the water and stick my hands under the stream, mostly because I need something to do with my hands.

She lifts her chin, I assume so she can look down her nose at me. "You're adorable, Rosie. Still out there trying to make it after all this time. Does waiting tables pay well these days?"

It's so cliché—actors waiting tables. I haven't worked in a restaurant in two years. Temp work proved to be much more my style. And I typically don't spill drinks on anyone in an office.

Although, there was that one time . . . I feel heat on my neck, the kind that rushes when you're in a scene and the other person forgets their lines. So many digs flit in and out of my mind, but then, like a person about to enter into an online argument with a troll, I hit delete, paste on a smile, and flick the water off.

"I need to get back to my friends," I say. "It was great running into you." I don't even bother drying my hands as I rush out of the bathroom before I say something I'll regret. I wish I could say she has no effect on me, but even I note the way the run-in has unsteadied me. As if that one encounter could transport me back to high school.

I'm not that girl anymore.

My mom emails me updates about my former classmates, and I happen to know that Ireland Abbot is a lawyer at some big, fancy firm in Chicago because in real life, mean girls do *not* finish last.

I hurry back to the table, decorated with a white tablecloth and the most adorable pink mason jar centerpiece with sprigs of greenery inside and try to put Ireland out of my mind. I bet she bought Taylor the stroller / car seat combo she had on her registry without any help from her mother.

I plop down in the chair next to Maya.

"You good?" she asks.

"Great," I say. "Just a little woozy I think." And tired from hauling every single thing I own all over Brooklyn, to the airport, and then to Pleasant Valley, the small town in Illinois where I grew up.

"So?" Marnie is smiling at me, as expectant as Taylor's stomach. "Tell us about this movie! What's it about? When can we see it?"

I force a smile. Thanks to the many, many phone calls from my perpetually worried mother, I've perfected the fine art of making my life sound shinier than it is.

I call it . . . creative storytelling.

It's not lying *exactly*. I'm telling my mom and stepdad that their daughter is doing just fine, despite a few challenges.

But honestly . . . I can't bear to say the truth out loud. What would everyone think if they knew?

"Well . . . my mom might have exaggerated a little about the movie gig." I don't have the heart to tell them my mom made that movie sound cooler than it was because *I* made it sound cooler than it was.

I absently wonder if there's a special place in hell for people who turn their mothers into liars.

"Where is your mom?" Marnie asks.

"She and John are on a cruise," I say, secretly thankful I don't have to contend with their worry as my life implodes.

I look around the restored loft right in the heart of downtown Pleasant Valley, searching for inspiration to change the subject.

"Was this building always here?"

"It was the gum factory," Marnie says. "Remember?"

"Wait, it was?" I frown, trying to remember, which I don't.

"The *mayor* is really pushing the downtown beautification plan," Maya says, weirdly emphasizing the word *mayor*. The others react to it too, which makes me feel like I'm on the outside of an inside joke. "Twenty-five by '25. It's this whole campaign to try to be a

Top 25 city by 2025. Murals, new lampposts, refurbishing buildings to try to attract more businesses . . .”

“Can we really call Pleasant Valley a ‘city’?” Marnie shakes her head. “More of a glorified rest stop.” We all laugh—me a bit longer and louder—and I know I’m working overtime to sell my own happiness, and I beg myself to stop being so obvious.

Marnie brings the attention back to me. “So! What’s next for you? Are you sticking around for a while? Can we at least get brunch in the morning?”

My heart aches.

I want to tell them the truth so badly.

I want to give up and admit that my life is in the toilet, that I’m virtually homeless, and that I’m very close to quitting on the only dream I’ve ever had.

And also? That I miss them.

But I can’t say any of it. The fear of disappointing them is too great.

I mentally stiffen. I’m an actor. I can get through one baby shower, right?

I force a smile. “Oh, I had a bunch of auditions last week, so I’m just waiting. That’s the hardest part of this whole thing . . . the waiting.” The image of the frantic self-taping, uploading, and résumé-submitting bender I’d gone on last week washes over me.

Like a woman possessed, I’d submitted myself for at least two dozen jobs, some of them I’m probably not even right for. Some acting jobs, some directing jobs—even one for a script doctor. And with every Send button I hit, I’d say a silent prayer that *this* could be the one that would change my life.

I go on these panic-induced submission benders sometimes, usually right around the time rent is due.

“It sounds wild,” Marnie says. “I could never do that. Not knowing what your next job will be or who you’ll be working with, or—”

“Uh, it sounds *exciting*,” Maya cuts in. “And it’s perfect for you, Rosie, since you’re such a people person.”

I smile. I am a people person. I do really well ushering people to their seats at the Winter Garden Theatre, which is the steadiest of all of my jobs but keeps me watching the stage instead of performing on it.

“What about you guys?” I ask, really wanting to stop talking about me.

Maya reaches over and squeezes Marnie’s arm. “Tell her your news!”

My eyes go wide. “What news?”

Marnie tosses a quick glance around the room and settles on Taylor, who is stuck in conversation with Mrs. Copecki. The only effective way to get out of a Mrs. Copecki conversation is to gnaw one of your own limbs off.

“It’s not a big deal,” Marnie says.

“Uh, it’s a *huge* deal.” Maya pushes her shoulder into Marnie’s. “Tell her, or I’m going to.”

“I got a new job,” Marnie says a bit shyly.

“She’s burying the lede. Come *on*, Mar, it’s in *Milwaukee*.” Maya’s eyes go wide. “And she’s the morning anchor!”

“Whoa!” My heart is instantly confused, and I hate it. I’m genuinely excited for Marnie, but her news makes me feel left out and somehow . . . small. I shove the thought aside because I want to be nothing but thrilled for her. She’s one of my very best friends, but I feel like I should’ve known this news already.

The fact that I don’t is my own fault.

“That’s amazing, Mar!” I say, meaning it. “So, wait. You’re moving?”

She nods. “I’ve already started hauling some of my stuff to my new apartment. I have a view of the lake right from my living room! I mean, you have to sort of crane your neck and look around a building, but it’s there, I promise.”

"I knew it was just a matter of time," I tell her. "You're so talented. And *such* a good reporter. I'd definitely want to have my morning coffee while you tell me what's going on in the world."

"You'd have to start watching the news to do that." Marnie smiles.

"Oof. Yeah." I shudder, then grin at her. In college, Marnie continued with the speech team and discovered she was really good at public speaking. Natural. Honest. And incredibly witty. She became a broadcast journalism major and got a job in a small market right after college. And now, an anchor in Milwaukee.

Her life is going according to plan.

"Maya has news too," Marnie says. "You next. Tell her."

Maya rolls her eyes, like she doesn't want to brag on herself, but we all know better. She holds out her perfectly manicured left hand and wiggles her fingers. It's the first time I notice the giant engagement ring she's wearing.

"Holy heck, Maya!" I grab her hand for a closer look at the ring. "You're *engaged*? Gil finally proposed?"

Maya's face falls. "Not Gil, Rosie. Matty."

"Wait. Matty?" I give my head a quick shake, trying to locate details I've obviously deleted from my mental hard drive. "Have I been living under a rock? Matty *Banks*?"

"Yes!" she gushes. "He's the mayor." She grins, and now I make the connection to the lilt on his title earlier. She lifts her hand, admiring her ring. "I can't believe it. I'm going to be a politician's wife."

"And she bought the salon," Marnie says, giving our friend a squeeze.

"You *bought* the salon?" I can't hide the surprise in my voice. Or the tears that spring to my eyes. "Oh my gosh, Maya! You're a business owner?"

Maya was not the one who was supposed to have her life together at this point.

As an actor, you're taught to tap into feelings and emotions—to use them to make scenes more honest and believable. But one of the most difficult parts of acting is that you have to portray your character's emotions while burying your own contradictory emotions at the same time.

This is what's happening to me right now.

Thrilled for my friends. Guilty for lying. Embarrassed about my life.

"What is it?" Maya leans forward and lowers her voice. "Are you okay?"

I sniff and try to shake the tears away. "I'm just . . ." I take a breath. "I'm so happy for you guys." I bring my attention back to my two friends. "I really, really am."

Maya lets out an "awww," but Marnie only stares. She squints at me. "Spill it."

I sniff again. "There's nothing to spill," I say. "I just miss you all. That's it, I promise."

She's not buying it.

Act better, Rosie.

I shake my head and give her hand a squeeze. "I'm fine. I just need to get home more, that's all." That isn't a lie. I do need to get home more. I need the three of them in my life.

How I'd survived this long without them is a mystery.

I glance over in time to see Taylor's pained look in our direction. As predicted, Mrs. Copecki is still gabbing, only now she's using her hands, which means she's moved on to the "armchair medical advice" portion of her diatribe.

I nod at Taylor. "I think she needs a swoop and save."

We all stand, silently and in unison, like we're soldiers just called into battle, and I don't miss how good it feels to be a part of this group again. To have people I fit in with. These three always accepted me, weirdness and all.

And they never, ever made me feel ridiculous for dreaming big

dreams.

I make acquaintances easily, but friends are harder to find. There are always people to go out and do things with, but they're nothing like these three are to me. It's tiring to be in a world where every friend is potential competition, and no one is ever telling the truth.

We all walk over to Taylor, each of us chatting very loudly about a random topic in voices that make what we're saying sound *very important*. I quickly realize we should've chosen a single topic to focus on because when Maya says, "I think he choked on a chicken bone, you have to come immediately," I start giggling.

Taylor tries to extract herself from a confused-looking Mrs. Copecki, who stops her with a hand on her arm and says, "Cabbage leaves are the only thing that are going to help with your sore boobs, but don't let that scare you off of breastfeeding. You need to find the nice big ones, ones that cover the whole—"

"Whoa, Mrs. Copecki!" I say, placing a hand on her shoulder. "It's fantastic advice, but I read that, uh, peanut butter is way better . . . for the skin. Right, Mar?" I widen my eyes, hoping for a "yes, and . . ."

She doesn't disappoint. "Oh yes, it's all the rage with our generation. You can even add jelly on the other one." And with divine timing that can only happen in the spur of the moment, we both look at each other and simultaneously say, "PB&J boobs!"

This makes Maya laugh, which makes Taylor laugh, and leaves Mrs. Copecki stunned into silence (an achievement not seen since Reagan was president). We rush Taylor out of the room and onto the rooftop terrace, where we all collapse into each other in a fit of laughter. The kind that really makes no sense but somehow doesn't have to.

Oh, how I've missed this. I ache from the laughing and the distance.

Maya can't breathe. Taylor has tears streaming down her face.

Marnie is doubled over, desperately clinging to me for support. I know I'm going to spend the rest of the day coughing and clearing my throat because that's what happens when I laugh this hard.

Honestly, I'm probably laughing more than the situation calls for just because I need to laugh.

A stray thought hits me.

What if I tell them what the last seven years have really been like? They might have advice. They might not think I'm a disaster.

It might be just fine.

Then, another thought.

Their plans are working out brilliantly.

Mine are rife with rejections. They think I'm doing fantastic—and I can't stand the thought of letting them down. Or of being the one they have to worry about. Or of being the failure.

So I stay quiet. Today isn't about me anyway.

"PB&J? Did you two plan that?" Taylor shakes her head, still wiping tears from her cheeks.

"Hey, she stopped talking about cabbage leaves," I say. "And, Mar, way to go all-in there. Impromptu speaking for the win!" I offer her a fist and, still bent over, she reaches up and bumps it.

Taylor giggles, then scans our little circle. "I wish we could ditch this shower and go hang out. We have so much to catch up on."

"Marnie and Maya told me their big news," I say. "Everyone is doing so, so great." The tears are back, clouding my vision. I blink a million times to keep them from falling.

"Yeah, but you've told us almost nothing about what you're doing, Rosie," Marnie says. "Is there a show coming up? Should we get tickets? Or set our DVRs so we don't miss some big debut?"

I push a hand through my hair, feeling like everything is about to come crashing down.

And I'm not about to be the sob story that ruins this shower.

I deflect. "Oh, there's plenty of time to catch up on all of that."

I wave a hand in the air. "Today is about you." I take a step toward Taylor. "I'm so happy for you, Tay. And Aaron too." I pull her into a tight hug, and after a few minutes, Maya and Marnie join in. We stand like that for at least thirty seconds—enough time for the hug to affect me, and when I pull away, I'm wiping tears from my cheeks.

"You're crying." Taylor reaches over and wipes my cheeks dry.

I point a finger at myself. "*Actor*. I can cry on cue," I say through a wonky smile. "This is just for effect." I push the emotions away. Like usual.

It doesn't seem to be working right now, though, which means I'm on shaky ground.

I do my best to get through the rest of the afternoon, like I'm performing a Saturday matinee of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the sixth show of eight, acting for a sea of blue hair in a three-hundred-seat auditorium.

And while I love seeing my friends and catching up with everyone, by the time I'm back in my parents' house that evening, all I want to do is hide.

I'm not thriving. I'm barely surviving.

This isn't how it was supposed to go.

And I have no idea how to fix it.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT DAY I MEET my friends for brunch.

Taylor and Marnie are brunch people, which is to say they do things before eleven in the morning, like eat avocado toast and talk to people who also eat avocado toast.

Maya and me? Not so much.

At least Maya didn't used to be. When I pull up to Harold's in the Square, the only restaurant that serves brunch in Pleasant Valley, I see her standing outside on her phone. She's impeccably dressed, hair pulled back into a slick ponytail, expensive bag hanging off her shoulder.

She looks so . . . grown-up. And so . . . put together. I don't see a trace of the rebellious Maya I used to know. The girl with the dark, thick eyeliner and black nail polish is gone, and in her place is this gorgeous, refined . . . adult . . . woman.

And she owns a business.

And she's marrying a mayor.

It's like I'm in some weird, twisted version of *Freaky Friday*, but all my friends have switched places with new, fancy, successful people, and I've stayed exactly the same.

Marnie appears on the sidewalk next to her, and suddenly I'm self-conscious about my outfit. The pink joggers and thrifted bright-yellow sweatshirt seemed like a good idea—I'm one for comfort over style, for sure—but there's no way to hide in a neon sweater.

I glance up at the rearview mirror and blink three times. "They love you, Rosie. They aren't going to think less of you if you tell them the truth. Just be honest—"

I gasp at the knock on the window of my mom's minivan and turn to see Taylor standing in the street, frowning. "What are you doing?" she shouts through the window, over-miming with her hands to indicate that I'm nuts.

I open the car door and get out. "You scared me to death."

"It's nice to see you still talk to yourself." She smiles.

"Beats paying for therapy," I quip, knowing that it doesn't—it's only cheaper.

I grab my bag and close the car door, clicking the button on the key fob to lock it.

"And you still carry a gigantic bag." She tosses me a sideways grin.

"Hey," I protest, "I seem to remember my gigantic bag saving you more than once."

"Fair point." She nods. "I could always count on you for an Advil or a sewing kit or a burrito—"

"That was one time," I say. "And it was an emergency."

"Emergency Burrito." Taylor says this like it's an official thing, and smiles as we cross the street toward the restaurant. "Do you know how many times during this pregnancy I wished I had a whole jar of Jif and one of those chocolate pudding Snack Packs?"

"As a matter of fact . . ." I start to dig through my bag.

"You don't have a—" She gasps before she can complete the thought as I pull out a chocolate Snack Pack.

"Oh. My. *Gosh*, Rosie!" We practically collapse into each other, laughing so hard we can't get words out. People walking by probably think we're deranged or drunk or both, but at this moment, I don't care.

Marnie walks over to us and starts to say, "What is wrong with . . ." And before she finishes, I toss the Snack Pack in her di-

rection, which she swats out of the air with a “What the . . . ?” like it’s a large bee made of pudding. It rockets straight into a guy’s arm who was walking past, and he startles with a, “Hey, watch it!”

This sends us into near-hysterical asphyxiation. Taylor grabs her stomach and wheezes, “Stop it, stop it, I’m going to have the baby right here!” I can’t breathe, and I’m going to die happy.

Taylor finally gathers enough air to gasp, “What the heck, you Snack Pack lunatic,” which sends us laughing again.

We come to our senses, shaking heads and wiping tears, and she wraps an arm around me. “Whew. I needed that. Oh my gosh.”

I glance around and notice a few side-eyes tossed our way. “We must look crazy.”

She laughs and points a don’t-get-me-started-again finger at me. “I know. You’re the only friend I have who is willing to make a fool of herself on my behalf.”

I grin and bend over to pick up the pudding. “I make a fool of myself as a job.”

Maya spots us from down the block and storms toward us. “Finally!” She lifts her arms, and her diamond catches the sunlight, a reminder that her life—like everyone else’s—is right on track. “I’m starving.”

Marnie smiles. “I’m so glad we’re all together again.”

“And we have so much to celebrate!” Taylor says.

Maya opens the door to the restaurant. “We can be sappy later. *After* I get my avocado toast.”

“She’s still mean when she’s hungry,” Marnie says in a low whisper as we walk inside.

“And she eats avocado toast. What’s next, lemongrass bagels?” I whisper back. Taylor stifles a laugh and gives me a gentle elbow to the ribs. Maya was always a little like a tiny garbage disposal. It was impressive how much food she could put away for being such a small human.

We’re seated at a table in the back, and after the waitress brings

us our drinks and takes our orders, I feel a shift in the mood. It's like a dark cloud just covered the sun, save for the spotlight that just flicked on in my face.

And, yep. They're all looking at me.

My smile is weak. I'd decided I need to come clean with them on the drive over. After all, if I don't go home tomorrow, which was my original plan, they're going to figure out the truth. That I don't have any idea what comes next.

Still, now that I'm sitting here, under the weighty glares of three people who probably know me better than anyone, my courage slinks out the back door.

"You haven't been straight with us," Marnie says.

Uh-oh.

"Yeah," Taylor chimes in. "We're trying to live vicariously through our friend who lives in New York City, but *she* won't tell us *anything* about what it's like."

My heart drops, hopefully not too noticeably. "Right. I was going to, I just—"

"We saw the video, Rosie. It's amazing!" Maya practically squeals.

"The . . . what? What video?"

"The one where you're like, mean." Maya shimmies her shoulders.

Mean? What are they . . . ?

Oh, wait.

The low-budget—but yes, professional—training video I did for future veterinarians. I portrayed the "what not to do" in three different scenarios, and the whole behind-the-scenes experience was a bit humiliating. The kind of video that would resurface if someone ever hosted a "Roast of Rosie Waterman" because it would provide so many opportunities for mockery.

But it was work. And it paid. So I took it.

I just didn't know anyone I knew would see it.

"It was so fun to see you being, you know, completely different than the way you really are," Taylor says.

My cheeks are hot. "How did you see it?"

"Your mom sent out a mass email," Maya says, and then, pointedly, "Otherwise, we never would've known."

The words *mass* and *email* land with a thud.

I try to regroup as I stammer, "Ugh, sh-she did? I mean, I should've . . . ugh . . . I'm sorry about that. It was a small thing, just for an industry training video, not like, you know, *Broadway* or anything."

If my mom and stepdad weren't on their Alaskan cruise right now, I would definitely have a few choice words for my mother.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Marnie asks. "We would've celebrated with you."

I shrug. "It's really not a big deal."

"It's a *huge* deal," Taylor says. "Every bit of work matters, right?"

They care. It's so obvious. Why not let them in?

What are you so afraid of?

I hope my laugh doesn't sound nervous. "I mean, yeah. Totally. Working actors work, so it doesn't really matter sometimes what the work is, right? *That* one, though . . ." I don't want to go into the details of how the director spoke to me, like I was hardly worthy to breathe the same air as him. And the script? I shudder remembering how terrible it was.

I should be thankful they're excited about this, but it just widens the divide between them wanting to celebrate the little things and me not wanting to talk about them at all.

"Can we talk about something else?" I ask.

Taylor's frown deepens. "Rosie, are you okay?"

I feel my smile give and I beg it to stay put. "I'm great." I take a sip of my iced tea and look away.

"She's not great," Maya says to the others like I'm not here.

"She's obviously not great," Marnie says.

"Ohh. Guy trouble?" Taylor asks.

Marnie sighs. "Not all of us are dying to get married, Taylor."

"No, but Rosie would be *such* a good girlfriend," Taylor says.

"Any guy would be lucky to have her. She's so fun and happy."

My insides roll. I feel neither of those things.

"When was the last time you went on a date, Ro?" Maya picks up a piece of bread from the basket at the center of the table and tears off a chunk. "Have you gone out with anyone since Peter?"

"Uh, it's been a while," I say.

"See?" Taylor reaches over and touches my shoulder. "You need to get out there. We aren't getting any younger." She rubs her belly.

"Are you on any of the apps?" Maya asks. "I could make you a profile while you're home."

Marnie levels my gaze. "Unless you don't want to get married and have kids, which is a totally cool choice too."

"How am I still the center of this conversation?" I ask.

"You're the most interesting." Marnie shrugs.

"I promise you I'm not."

I point at Marnie. "New job."

I point at Taylor. "Brunching for two. Maybe three, who knows."

She snorts and tosses a piece of bread at me.

I point at Maya. "Shacking up with a mayor."

Taylor snorts again as the other two shake their heads at me.

"You're living in *New York*, Rosie," Maya says. "It may as well be another planet. We all still live here. "

"Not for long." Marnie tips her glass at us and sips her drink through a smile.

Maya sulks. "I always thought I'd be the one to get out of here."

"If you marry the mayor, you could be here forever." Taylor takes a sip of her tomato juice, because apparently she had a craving.

I turn to Marnie, hoping that this will be an acceptable change of subject. “When do you move?”

“She moves in two weeks,” Maya says. “We know all of Marnie’s news. You are the mystery.”

So much for that plan.

“Agree,” Taylor says, then adds, “no offense, Marnie.”

Marnie holds up a dismissive hand as Taylor turns back to me, talking with her hands: “We want to hear about your big, amazing life. We definitely want to come see one of your shows—anything you’re in, really—but the only time we hear about them is from your mom.”

“After they’re over.” Marnie picks up a mini muffin from a basket at the center of the table. “I can’t keep doing this no-carb thing. It’s killing me. Can I . . . just . . .” She takes two more muffins.

“Carbs are amazing.” Maya picks up a muffin and shoves the whole thing in her mouth. She practically moans as she chews, so loudly she draws attention from an elderly woman at the next table. She grins at her. “It’s so good!”

The woman frowns and turns away. I smile to discover there is still a trace of the Maya I knew in this well-manicured, pristine package.

Marnie pushes the muffins away and takes a sip of her mimosa. I pause to admire her for a second. She’s dressed in all black with black sunglasses propped on top of her head, perfectly straight, shiny brown hair cut into a very professional shoulder-length bob. She looks like a reporter.

“Rosie, what is going on with you?” Taylor asks. “I find out all your updates from social media. Do you even read our group chat anymore?”

“Of course I do,” I say. “I just don’t text in there because . . .” I stop myself from saying, “*Because I have zero news and my life sucks,*” and instead complete the thought with, “Because sometimes the

updates just aren't that exciting. You know, little things. Not the *really* big thing."

"Yet," Marnie says.

Yeah, I think. Yet will forever be tomorrow, or next week, or next month.

Or never.

"I won't lie," I say, knowing that's all I'm doing. "It's not easy. Lots of auditioning and waiting. Lots of prepping and preparing and recording and refreshing your email. It's just not, you know, exciting all the time."

My updates would be things like: *"Got a temp job in an office. I'll be here three days, which is, apparently, long enough for me to spill coffee on three different people and screw up the bagel order for the entire office."*

Nobody wants to hear these kinds of things. I'd be the lead in a new play called *Head Above Water: Barely*.

"So?" Taylor says, but they're all looking at me now.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I ignore it for a moment.

"So . . ." This is the point in movies where the leading lady tells some outlandish lie that always, always comes back to bite her. Like, *"I'm secretly a princess hiding my identity by living this very mundane life."* Or, *"I'm talking to this big Broadway director, and it's only a matter of time, really, before I go on for the lead in Mamma Mia!"*

But these are my friends.

And friends don't lie to each other.

Which is why I've been distant.

Because if I'm not texting or calling, I'm not lying. They all still believe I'm living the shiny life I set out to live.

The waitress appears at the table, along with a man who is carrying two trays. They arrange our meals in front of us, and when they walk away, we all have to switch plates because they mixed up each of our orders. I glance up. My friends are now occupied with their food, and something inside me squeezes at the sight of them.

I have to come clean. I have to tell them what life has been like

for me.

I need one of them to tell me it's okay to quit. Because I think that's what I need to hear.

I say a silent prayer. *Lord, please. Give me the strength to give up on this dream. And look, if You've got something out there for me, give me a si—*

My phone buzzes again. I pull it out and see a new email notification.

"How does everything look?" The waitress is back.

"Actually, I ordered the *fiesta* potato platter," Taylor says. "I think this might be the *siesta* potato platter."

"She's here to party, not to nap," Maya quips as she shakes an insane amount of salt onto her avocado toast.

The waitress laughs, and they all start chatting, diverting everyone's attention away from me long enough that I can skim the email:

Dear Miss Waterman,

We received your application for employment for our summer theatre program at Sunset Players. After careful consideration, we feel like you would be an excellent fit to join the creative team for our upcoming production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Cinderella*. Attached, you'll find the payment package, which does include room and board. Please look it over, and let us know as soon as possible if you're still interested in the job.

Auditions are next week, so we'll need to get you here this Friday for a tour of the grounds and to get you all settled into your living quarters right away.

We have a vibrant theatre arts program in Door County, Wisconsin, and we're thrilled to welcome you to the family!

Because of the quick turnaround and preparation

required, we will need your answer by this Tuesday. We apologize for the last-minute request. We had some staffing changes, and here we are. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Connie Spencer
Human Resources Director

I reread the email, more carefully this time, trying to remember whether I applied for this job during one of my panicked root-beer-float benders. It seems like this would be one of the many jobs I clicked on, even though I have no memory of doing so.

I click the attachment and open the payment package details.

Um. It pays.

Whoa.

Really, *really* well.

Not only does this job include room and board for the entire summer, but it also pays better than any acting job I've had in my entire career. While it's a little unnerving that this is all happening so quickly—plus being on the creative team rather than on the stage, which suggests someone bailed on the job at the last minute—I just have to wonder.

Don't give up yet, Rosie.

I navigate over to the Sunset Playhouse website and see that they are, in fact, a legitimate organization, so having money to pay the creative team makes sense. I click around for a few minutes, looking for information on this particular production of *Cinderella*, but I come up empty. So the website is a little outdated . . . not a big deal. If they've had staffing issues, it makes sense. Maybe I can help.

And let's be real, I don't have any other options right now.

The timing of this isn't lost on me. I was about to unload the

truth about the last seven years, hoping one of my friends would tell me to quit. It wasn't what I signed up for. It didn't pan out, and that's okay.

But now this. An out-of-the-blue job I never could've seen coming.

I click back over to the email and type out a reply, half listening to the conversation that has now turned to the dating lives of the waitstaff in this restaurant, because there is a story about every one of them and Maya knows them all.

Ms. Spencer,

It is wonderful to hear from you with such excellent news! I've looked over the materials, and I would love to officially accept the job. I can be in Door County by Friday, and I'm excited to begin.

Sincerely,
Rosie Waterman

I hit Send and watch as the email disappears, noting the slightly giddy feeling rising up inside me.

I got a job. In a theatre. And it doesn't involve showing anyone to their seats.

My mother's words rush back. "*Promise me you won't let anyone steal your dreams, Rosie.*" And I absently wonder if "anyone" includes me.

"So . . ." I interrupt their conversation now that I have actual news, which feels good. Especially since I'm telling the truth.

"I wanted to let you know I'm going to be part of the creative team for a production of *Cinderella*." I realize as I say it that I know very little about what this job entails.

They collectively gasp, wide-eyed.

Dropped silverware, hands raised, there's overlapping, "Like, directing? Have you done that?" with "I knew you were keeping

something from us!” and “Where? When can we come see it? I love *Cinderella!*”

And as I smile—and as they genuinely are happy for me—my reservations fall away, and I can’t help but wonder if *this* is the one.

Is this the job that’s going to change my life?



CHAPTER 3

THURSDAY MORNING, ALL THREE OF my friends insist on driving me, en masse, to the bus station, which is about a half an hour away.

We all pile into Taylor's SUV because it's the biggest, and my heart breaks yet again at the realization that I'm not ready to leave.

Over the last several days, I've helped Marnie pack up her apartment, gone cake tasting with Maya, and helped Taylor address the thank-you cards from her shower.

To some, boring and mundane.

To me? Brilliant and special.

A stark reminder of what's been missing.

When I told them I'd taken the job in Wisconsin, they were so genuinely excited for me. It made the whole thing seem important. I got a job! No, it's not New York, but it's a professional job in the theatre, which Taylor was quick to point out.

To them, that was a very big deal. Maybe a little celebrating was in order.

Their support buoyed me. It made me feel like I wasn't totally crazy for quickly replying yes and hitting Send.

However, now that the bus station is getting closer and the job is somehow getting more real, a wave of worry washes over me.

What if I'm making a terrible mistake? What exactly will they want me to do on a creative team? Yeah, I took directing classes in college, but I've never actually done it. Assisting someone could

be a great learning experience, though. Maybe that's my new job. Why didn't I ask more questions?

Oh, right. Because I'm desperate.

Maya leans her face forward between the front seats of the SUV and smiles at me. "I made you a dating profile."

I spin around and look at her. "You did what?"

"I don't like the thought of you being alone in Door County," she says, sitting back. "Or in New York. Or anywhere, for that matter."

"And you think I need a guy?" I fake scoff. "I'm a strong, fierce, independent woman."

"Right, but you're not getting any younger, so I made you a dating profile." She reaches forward and clicks her perfectly manicured nail on my phone three times.

"Again with this," Marnie groans. "We're not old, Maya." She pushes Maya out of the way and sticks her face between the seats. "Ever since she and Matty started dating, she's convinced that nobody can be truly happy if they're not in a relationship. I tried to tell her that I'm a career girl and I'm perfectly content, but guess what?"

I wince. "She made you a profile too?"

"She made me a profile too." Marnie rolls her eyes and slumps back in her seat.

Maya swipes around on her phone, then hands it to me, revealing Marnie's profile. "I'm very good at making them. And since I'm officially off the market, it's my job."

"Well, in that case, you're fired," I quip.

I click through the photos Maya has added to the profile. "Marnie, you look hot! What is this picture from?"

"Class reunion," Maya says, then teasing, she adds, "The one you didn't come home for."

Now I'm the one who groans. I'd bailed on them.

"The life of a career girl," Marnie says sympathetically.

More like the life of a broke girl, I think but don't say.

"I did switch your location to Milwaukee, Mar." Maya takes the phone back from me. "You might want to give the most recent matches a look before you just write them off. I mean, do you really want to miss out on this?" She holds up the phone to reveal the photo of a very attractive, outdoorsy-looking man.

My eyes widen. "Whoa. How is that man single? He looks like if Old Spice were a person."

Taylor and I both laugh, but Marnie doesn't crack a smile. "I think dating apps are stupid," she says. "And sleazy."

"I met Matty on an app," Maya says.

"We went to high school with Matty," Taylor says, not turning back to look at her.

Maya shakes her head. "I mean I *re*-met him on an app. We didn't really know each other in high school. He was older, and I was—"

"Dating Troy," I say in a singsong.

After a beat, there's a collective "*Troyyyy . . . !*" from all of us at the memory of Maya's high school boyfriend, the one who didn't seem to believe in bathing or washing his hair.

Maya rolls her eyes. "It was a phase."

"He smelled like a boy's dorm room." I scrunch my face. "Dirty clothes and . . ."

"Weed," Taylor supplies.

"Whatever!" Maya protests. "I thought he was hot. He was in a band."

"What was the name of his band?" Taylor asks over her shoulder.

The three of us in unison shout "Stiff Kitty!" and then laugh.

"How can you not remember that?" I ask Taylor. "Their logo was a cat face with X's for eyes, stuck to the grill of a car."

"Say what you want, I don't care." Maya fakes getting defensive, then looks at me. "I didn't have as much to go on for your profile,

Rosie, but I still think it came together. You'll need to download the app, and all the notifications will come right to your inbox. I texted you the log-in info."

"Maya, I'm even less interested in dating than Marnie is," I tell her.

"Why? Don't you want to meet some drummer in a band and live happily ever after?" Maya teases.

"Aren't those two things mutually exclusive?" I ask.

She makes a face. "Good men are out there. Look at Aaron"—she motions to Taylor—"And Matty." She smiles a little to herself. "You two both deserve to be as happy as we are."

"Aaron leaves his underwear on the bathroom floor and he still plays video games until 2:00 a.m." Taylor sighs. "So you actually might be a little happier than I am right now."

When she realizes we're all looking at her, she scrunches her face and quickly adds, "I'm sorry. I'm just hormonal."

Maya shrugs this off like she's used to it. "I have a good feeling about this summer, Ro."

"I'm still struggling with your use of the word *men*." I groan. "Are we old enough to be dating men?"

"Heck yeah," Maya says. "And don't settle for dating some boy. You deserve to be dating a man."

Maya takes my phone out of the drink holder, sticks it in front of my face to use facial recognition to open it and starts clicking. "I'm just going to download the app . . . right . . . there." She flips it around and points to a hot-pink square with a red heart in the middle. "This is it. Love Match. I set up push notifications so anytime someone likes your profile or leaves a message, you get a text."

"Oh no," I say. "No notifications. Take that off."

She mockingly shrugs. "I'm sorry, I forgot how to do that."

I narrow my eyes playfully. "You're the worst."

"I look forward to hearing you take that back when you find

the love of your life,” she says, her tone wistful. “You can thank me later.”

“I’m not a casual dater, Maya, you know that. I’m not even a biannual dater.” I drop my phone back in my giant bag. It’ll sink down into the abyss, and I’ll have to dump everything out to find it, but at least it’s safe from Maya’s impending matchmaking.

“I don’t see the point in dating people I have no interest in marrying,” I continue. “Isn’t that the whole reason people go on dates? Find the match, walk the aisle, pump out two point five kids?”

“Rosie, I swear, you’re an eighty-seven-year-old woman trapped in a hot, twenty-nine-year-old body.”

“Actually, I am,” I quip. “Get off my lawn.”

She laughs and sits back.

I muse, “I like people, but I like to be home too. Honestly, my idea of a perfect date would be, like, making dinner at home and binge-watching *The Office*.” I shrug. “Too much going out is exhausting.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re still single,” Taylor pipes in.

I point a finger at her in agreement. “Maybe that *is* why I’m still single.”

“Well, if you and Marnie don’t start putting yourselves out there, you’re going to end up like Miss Bates.” She puckers her lips in what I can only assume is supposed to be an old-spinster expression, or her impersonation of one of the actresses who played Miss Bates in one of the many *Emma* adaptations.

“I happen to *like* Miss Bates,” I say. “She’s the underdog.”

“There’s just one problem, Ro.” Maya peers at me, like she’s about to say something important. “The underdog doesn’t usually win.”

Before my mind can process that, Taylor pulls the car into an empty parking space in front of the bus station. “We’re here!”

We get out of the car and walk around the back. I open the hatch and pull out my suitcase, and after I’ve closed the trunk, I

turn and face them.

Taylor's already wiping tears from her cheeks, Maya's wearing a pouty expression, and Marnie's just staring at me.

"Promise you're going to be better about staying in touch," Taylor says.

"I promise," I say, meaning it.

"Promise me you're going to at least pay some attention to those dating app notifications," Maya says.

I smirk. "I promise I will think about maybe trying to remember once in a while to at least pay some attention periodically."

Marnie reaches out and hugs me. "Don't let her make you think you need a man."

I hug her back. "Fierce independent woman," I say.

I move to Maya, who squeezes me hard, then makes a pouty face. "You can be independent and still be in love."

I nod, smiling at her, and glance over at Taylor, whose face is a patchwork of emotions.

"I'll miss you," she says.

I pull her into a hug. "I'll miss you too," I say. "But I'm coming back when Baby Rosie is born."

"Uh, her name's Maya," Maya says.

"Marnie is more original." Marnie hitches her purse up on her shoulder, disinterested in having an emotional goodbye.

I smile at Taylor. And I pause. Almost long enough to define it as lingering. "I don't want to leave you guys."

"Good, it's important for you to remember you've got people. And we love you," Taylor says.

"I know." I give a definitive nod, determined in this moment to be a better friend. "I'll let you guys know when I get there."

I pull the handle up on the suitcase and balance my bag on top. Most of what I own is in this suitcase. Most of what I had back in New York belonged to my roommates or wasn't worth keeping, which is why I didn't put up a fight when Ellen packed me up and

sent me on my way.

My whole life is in this bag. I look up at my three best friends.

Or maybe my whole life is in this parking lot.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



COURTNEY WALSH is a novelist, theater director, and playwright. She writes small town romance and women's fiction while juggling the performing arts studio and youth theatre she owns with her husband. She is the author of thirteen novels. Her debut, *A Sweethaven Summer*, hit the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestseller lists and was a Carol Award finalist. Her novel *Just Let Go* won the Carol in 2019, and three of her novels have also been Christy Award finalists. A creative at heart, Courtney has also written three craft books and several musicals. She lives in Illinois with her husband and three children.

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