



Change
OF
Heart
A NOVEL

COURTNEY WALSH

PRAISE FOR
Paper Hearts

AND OTHER NOVELS BY COURTNEY WALSH

“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

“Walsh writes a small-town setting, a sweet, slow-building romance between two likable characters and a host of eclectic secondary characters.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Well written and charming.”

NOVEL REVIEWS

“I discovered Courtney Walsh’s novels a few years ago and quickly added her to my must-buy-immediately list. Her 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. You won’t want to miss *Paper Hearts!*”

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. . . . Like the matchmakers that surrounded the couple in the novel, I couldn’t help cheering them on. A poignant, wry, sweet, and utterly charming read.”

BECKY WADE, author of *Meant to Be Mine*

A Sweethaven Summer

“Walsh’s touching debut will have readers longing for a visit to the idyllic vista of Sweethaven. . . . The touch of mystery, significant friendships, and a charming setting create a real treasure.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Walsh has created a charming, inviting, homesick-inducing world with Sweethaven. I want to hug the ladies featured in the book and learn from them. . . . To fellow readers, this is a series you don’t want to miss.”

NOVELCROSSING.COM

“A masterful word painting, *A Sweethaven Summer* is a story of loss, regret, forgiveness, and restoration. Novel Rocket and I give it our highest recommendation. It’s a five-star must-read.”

ANE MULLIGAN, president, Novel Rocket

“This book captivated me from the first paragraphs. Bittersweet memories, long-kept secrets, the timeless friendships of women—and a touch of sweet romance. Beautifully written and peopled with characters who became my friends, this debut novel is one for my keeper shelf—and, I hope, the first of many to come from Courtney Walsh’s pen.”

DEBORAH RANEY, author of the Chicory Inn Novels series

“*A Sweethaven Summer* is a sweet debut, filled with characters whose hopes, dreams, and regrets are relevant and relatable. A great book club read!”

SUSAN MEISSNER, author of *A Fall of Marigolds*

“*A Sweethaven Summer* is a stunning debut. . . . With a voice that sparkles, Courtney Walsh captured my heart in this tender story of forgiveness and new beginnings. It’s certainly a great beginning for this talented author.”

CARLA STEWART, author of *The Hatmaker’s Heart*

“Courtney Walsh weaves a captivating tale that taps into the universal desire for belonging and happiness. This delightful debut has a bit of mystery, a bit of romance, a beautiful setting, and an intriguing cast of characters.”

MEGAN DIMARIA, author of *Searching for Spice*

“*A Sweethaven Summer* shines with moments of hope and tenderness. With interesting characters, a delightful setting, and a compelling plot, this is one of those stories that stays with you.”

TINA ANN FORKNER, author of *Ruby Among Us*

A Sweethaven Homecoming

“Courtney Walsh puts the sweet in Sweethaven. If you’re looking for an uplifting, hope-filled story filled with characters you’ll feel like you know, *A Sweethaven Homecoming* has it!”

MARYBETH WHALEN, author of *The Bridge Tender*

“*A Sweethaven Homecoming* is a triumph! With the foundations of family, love, and faith, *The Circle* grows through heartbreak,

loss, and betrayal and emerges renewed in their love for one another and, most of all, their love of themselves.”

SUSAN OPEL, creative editor, *Paper Crafts* magazine

A Sweethaven Christmas

“Readers will smell the pine of Christmas trees and the aromas of holiday food and will hold close the friendships they develop with the characters.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Walsh’s compelling writing style creates unforgettable characters readers come to know and love, while her story lines contend with issues common to us all. . . . Even though the ending is emotional (keep [a] box of Kleenex handy), it’s a story of hope, goodwill, and good friends that is perfect for the Christmas season.”

EXAMINER.COM

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CHAPTER



1



EVELYN BRANDT STOOD in her kitchen, the sound of uptight laughter filtering in from the dining room.

Hosting the Loves Park Chamber Ladies hadn't been her idea. Christopher told her a good politician's wife had to put herself out there. So she did.

And now she regretted it. It wasn't the first time that agreeing to something she didn't want to do had ended in regret.

She dialed Christopher's work line.

"Christopher Brandt."

". . . is in serious trouble," Evelyn said.

"Evelyn?" He sounded concerned, telling her he hadn't gotten her joke.

"This luncheon is pure torture," she whispered. "You owe me."

His laugh was forced. "I do owe you. Thanks for playing nice."

Of course she played nice. That was the only way she knew how to play. Learn the rules and follow them. Words to live by.

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“Evelyn, do you have any more peach tea?” Georgina Saunders appeared in the doorway, took one look at her, and frowned. “I didn’t realize you were on a call.”

Bad manners?

Evelyn said a quick good-bye to her husband and hung up. “I’m sorry about that. I’ll bring more tea.”

The caterer appeared to be occupied in the corner of the kitchen. So Evelyn took the empty crystal pitcher from Georgina, president of their philanthropic group, and moved to the opposite side of the room, thankful when the other woman returned to the dining room. If Evelyn had her way, she would’ve hidden out in the kitchen for the rest of the luncheon.

But the pecan-crusted chicken with chardonnay cream sauce hadn’t even been served yet.

As Evelyn refilled and picked up the pitcher, it slipped from her hands. She caught it before it hit the ground, but not before the peach tea sloshed onto her black-and-white silk and cotton dress, the one Christopher had special ordered for this occasion. The one that made Evelyn feel like a child playing dress-up in her mom’s closet.

Even after all these years of learning to fit the mold, she still felt uncomfortable in these scenarios.

“Evelyn, do you have that tea?” Georgina returned. “Oh, my. How clumsy of you. You should soak that before it stains.”

Evelyn nodded. “I think I’ll go change.”

“Good idea.” Georgina took the pitcher and left the kitchen.

Evelyn hurried upstairs, pulled off the dress, and stood in her closet. What she really wanted was a pair of worn-out jeans and her oversize light-gray sweater.

But that would never do, and she didn’t want to embarrass Christopher. She knew how important these ladies were to his political career, both present and future.

She returned to the dining room, wearing a simple pair of black

dress pants, heels, and a loose patterned blouse. A conversation was already in progress.

Georgina sat at the end of the table like a queen on a throne, chin tilted ever so slightly downward as always, eyebrows raised in judgment. "I hadn't heard that about Willa Seitz's husband," she was saying.

Evelyn frowned as she took her seat at the opposite end of the table.

"Did you know he was having an affair with Willa's sister, Evelyn?"

Evelyn felt her eyes widen. "I hadn't heard that, no." She should call Willa. Make sure she was okay. They didn't know each other well, but their paths had crossed enough for Evelyn to consider her an acquaintance at least, if not a friend.

And if the expressions on the faces of the women in her dining room were any indication, Willa Seitz wouldn't have many of those now.

"Seems it's been going on for quite some time." Georgina surveyed the rest of them. "We should all say a prayer of thanks for faithful husbands, ladies."

Yes. Evelyn was grateful for that, though she wished her husband was home more often. Being a state senator kept him busy. And away.

But then, weren't his position and his power part of what she loved about him? Her mind conjured an image of Christopher. Handsome and charming with eyes that sparkled and a smile that melted hearts. She'd never met anyone with quite so much charisma, and while she certainly didn't enjoy the days they were apart each month, the wife of a public servant had to make sacrifices too.

The main course was served, and the ladies around her table began eating the catered lunch. Evelyn mostly stayed quiet at these sorts of functions, meant for networking and planning the

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occasional philanthropic event. Christopher thought it was important she was involved.

“These women decide the who’s who of Colorado,” he’d told her. “Be charming and wonderful. We need their support.”

She did as she was told, and while she never uttered a word of protest, she dreaded these luncheons more than dental work.

“Evelyn, will Christopher be home this weekend?” Lydia Danvers straightened. The woman might have been four years older than Evelyn, but she dressed fifteen years younger. All that time spent in the gym had certainly worked in her favor.

Evelyn shrank under her watchful eye. “He hopes to be,” she said, then took a sip of her tea. “His schedule is always up in the air.”

Lydia gave a curt nod, then a quick once-over. “Did you change your clothes?”

Evelyn smoothed her blouse. “I did. I just spilled some tea on myself.”

The ladies laughed. “Oh, Evelyn, it’s a good thing you had this meal catered,” Georgina said.

More laughter.

Heat rushed to Evelyn’s cheeks. She would tell Christopher she needed a break from the entertaining. She didn’t have the gift of hospitality, and it was time she said so.

After this luncheon.

The doorbell rang, drawing all six pairs of eyes toward Evelyn.

“Are you expecting someone else?” Georgina asked.

Evelyn set her cloth napkin on the table as she pushed herself up. She’d never been more thankful for a doorbell in her life.

But when she moved toward the front door and spotted a man and a woman, both dressed in suits and looking quite official, her gratitude slowly dissipated.

She stood motionless on her side of the door, staring at them through the window until they flipped open badges, expectancy on their faces.

“Who is it, Evelyn?” Georgina called from the other room.

She cracked the door as her heart became a stopwatch set on double time.

“Evelyn Brandt?”

She nodded through the half-open door. “Yes?”

“Agent Marcus Todd, FBI. This is Agent Debbie Marnetti.”

“What can I do for you?” Her stomach fluttered, and that familiar panicked feeling set in. And just like that she was eleven years old again, waiting for her father to come home, knowing her grades would not meet his approval. Her anxiety had turned to panic even then, and she’d been battling it ever since. Would she ever find comfort in her own skin?

Not now. She needed to keep it together.

“We need to speak to you about your husband. May we come in?”

“Christopher? Has something happened?” Evelyn didn’t move from her spot in the doorway, her mind racing back to the quick conversation she’d had with her husband earlier today. He had seemed distracted—well, even more so than usual—but everything else was fine. He would’ve told her if it wasn’t.

“Ma’am?”

Evelyn realized she’d been staring, mind reeling, and she quickly apologized. “I have guests.”

The woman—Marnetti—rolled her eyes. The man gave her a warm smile. “It might be a good idea to ask them to leave.”

Evelyn felt like she’d just been asked to return to the doctor’s office for an in-person explanation of her test results.

“We really do need to speak to you immediately,” Agent Todd told her.

“Of course. Come in.”

She led them to the living room of their lakefront house. The house Christopher bought without telling her. He said it was a gift for her, but Evelyn knew better. The lake ran through Loves

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Park, and the homes surrounding it were some of the most desirable in town.

“It’s a house worthy of a future governor,” he’d told her on their first walk-through, confirming her suspicions.

“It’s so big,” she said. “What are we going to do with all this extra space?” The ornate fixtures certainly didn’t seem like the kinds one would have in a houseful of children.

“We’ll be entertaining,” Christopher had told her. “Fund-raising. Campaigning. I’ve hired a decorator to come in and redo everything.”

“Can we really afford that, Christopher?”

He pulled her into his arms. “You deserve a beautiful home, Evelyn. I want you to have the best.”

She looked past him to the elaborate staircase at the center of the entryway. “I don’t need all of this. I’d be happy with a small house in the country. As long as you’re there. You know that.”

His phone had chirped in his pocket and he’d excused himself to the other room, leaving her alone in the middle of a house she was sure would always feel more like a hotel than a home.

Now, in spite of the people surrounding her, Evelyn felt more alone than ever. She gestured for the agents to sit on the posh sofa Christopher’s decorator had picked out.

“Can I get either of you something to drink?” she asked, trying to remember her manners in spite of her trembling hands.

“We’re fine, Mrs. Brandt.” Agent Marnetti’s tone almost sounded like a reprimand.

Evelyn begged her heart to stop pounding.

“Evelyn, are you coming back?” Georgina appeared once more in the doorway. Her perfectly tweezed brows drew downward.

Evelyn’s throat went dry.

“Who are you?” Georgina’s superiority permeated the air.

“Georgina, I think it’s best if we cut the luncheon short.”

“We haven’t even begun the meeting,” Georgina said. “The others are still eating.”

“Georgina, please.” Evelyn practically pushed her out of the room, wishing she would just take a hint already. Her mind spun with possible scenarios. Why on earth was the FBI in her living room? And was there any way to get these ladies out without having to answer a million questions?

“Evelyn, I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone here,” Georgina said as they returned to the dining room. “Ladies, there are two strangers who’ve just barged into Evelyn’s house. I think we need to get to the bottom of this.”

Evelyn sighed. “They’re from the FBI.”

A collective gasp filled the room.

“What do they want with you?” Susan Hayes asked, rising from the table.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn said. “I haven’t found out yet. Please go and let me call you all later.”

“We should stay,” Georgina argued.

“No.” Evelyn’s tone was firm for once. “Please go.”

These women were really only here to help Christopher’s political career, and whatever the FBI wanted, she had a feeling it wasn’t going to be very helpful.

Evelyn suspected that before she discovered why the FBI was sitting on her sofa, Georgina and the others would have a litany of false explanations floating around town. She ushered them out, dismissed the caterer, and returned to the room where she’d left the agents.

“Do you know why we’re here?” Agent Todd asked.

Evelyn shook her head. “You said it was about Christopher.”

“Where is your husband now?” Agent Marnetti asked. She stood near the windows.

“Denver. They’re in session. He’s a Colorado state senator. He was elected three years ago. He worked hard to get where he is.” She was rambling.

Something passed between the two agents in a silent exchange.

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“What is it?” Evelyn folded her hands in her lap, feeling a rush of anxiety rise to the surface.

“This is quite the house you have here, Mrs. Brandt.” Agent Marnetti walked toward the fireplace. “Is this marble?” She ran a hand along the mantel—a mantel most women would love. Evelyn had never cared for it. She’d tried her best to add personal touches—Christopher had allowed her to give three photos of the two of them to his decorator, a regal woman whose accent sounded like a cross between Britain and the Upper East Side. The photos stared at her from the mantel now.

“How do you suppose your husband paid for such a lavish home, Mrs. Brandt?” Agent Marnetti asked as she picked up a framed wedding photo.

“Would you mind telling me why you’re here?” Evelyn stared at the agents. She had a right to know, didn’t she?

The two officials exchanged another telling glance. Agent Marnetti looked away.

Agent Todd turned toward Evelyn. “We believe Senator Brandt has been embezzling money from the state.”

Evelyn’s stomach twisted. “That’s not possible.”

“We have evidence,” Agent Marnetti said. “Lots of evidence. And we think it started long before he became a state senator.”

Christopher adored Loves Park. Serving in city government had been a point of pride for him. Surely there’d been a mistake—he would never do anything to jeopardize his future.

Their future.

“I’d like to call my husband.”

“There will be time for that, but right now we’re going to have to ask you to step outside.”

“Why?”

“We need to look around. Determine your involvement in your husband’s crimes.”

“*My* involvement? I don’t even know what you’re talking

about.” Evelyn’s fingers were cold, like they always felt when she was nervous.

“Then you have nothing to worry about,” Agent Todd said, his tone kind.

It was clear who was who in the whole good cop/bad cop scenario.

“Have you noticed any other elaborate purchases?” Agent Marnetti asked. “I mean, other than the house.”

Evelyn frowned. “I don’t know. Christopher’s family has money. It’s not so hard to believe he’d be able to afford the things he’s bought.”

“He lost all of his family’s money a few years ago, Mrs. Brandt,” Agent Todd said. “The senator made a few bad investments and lost it all.”

“That’s not possible,” Evelyn said. “He would’ve told me.”

“It seems there’s a lot he didn’t tell you,” Agent Marnetti replied. “Or maybe he’s just trained you really well on how to look innocent.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Evelyn said. “Christopher handled all of our money. I never even paid attention.” Her voice trailed off at the realization. She hadn’t wanted to know about the money. Christopher assured her they were fine, and that was good enough for her.

She trusted him.

“Probably not the smartest choice.” Agent Marnetti crossed her arms. “I find it hard to believe you didn’t suspect anything. What about the cabin your husband purchased last month up in the mountains?”

“Our vacation home?” Evelyn had thought it was a bit excessive when Christopher bought that place, but she wouldn’t tell them that.

“Quite a price tag on a home you rarely stay in.”

“He was going to rent it out. Try to make some extra income. Christopher is a brilliant businessman.”

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“Spare us the rhetoric, Mrs. Brandt.” Agent Marnetti pulled a walkie-talkie out of her pocket. “Come on in,” she said.

Agent Todd stood. “Why don’t we go outside? You don’t need to watch this.”

The front door opened, and a group of men in suits entered, rushing past Evelyn.

“You can’t do this,” she said, her voice barely audible.

Agent Marnetti stopped in front of her. “We have a warrant.” She snapped open a folded piece of paper and handed it to Evelyn.

Her phone beeped. A new text message from Susan Hayes. Georgina would like a full report once the FBI leaves your house. We’ll finish our meeting at her house. Join if you can.

“It’ll be easier for you if you come with me,” Agent Todd said.

“You’re just going to go through all of our things?”

“We’ll only take what’s pertinent to the case.”

A man walked by with her laptop.

“That’s mine. Christopher has nothing to do with that computer.”

“He might have hidden things on it, Mrs. Brandt. We have to cover all the bases.” Agent Todd ushered her toward the front door. “You can wait in my car.”

Evelyn’s head started to spin, her heart raced, and she couldn’t get a good, deep breath. *Not now.* She turned her phone over in her hand. “I need to call my husband.”

Agent Marnetti snatched the phone from her. “Not a good idea.”

“He won’t answer, Mrs. Brandt,” Agent Todd said.

“How do you know that?”

“According to our director, he was arrested about fifteen minutes ago.”

Evelyn couldn’t process what she was hearing. “I just spoke with Christopher. He didn’t say anything. Why didn’t anyone call me?”

“We couldn’t risk you destroying evidence. Now, please, let’s go outside.” Agent Todd opened the door.

As Evelyn stepped onto the porch, she heard her name being called from the yard. She glanced up and saw four television cameras all fixed on her.

“Mrs. Brandt, did you know about the senator’s embezzlement?”

“Mrs. Brandt, are you an accomplice to the fraud?”

“Did you know your husband was a crook?”

Wondering if she’d ever wake up from this terrible nightmare, Evelyn took a backward step into the house and slammed the door. “Get those people out of my yard.”

“We’re working on it.”

Evelyn walked through the house, trying not to pay attention to the way these federal agents were carelessly searching through everything she owned. She went out to the rear patio with Agent Todd following close behind.

“Can you just leave me alone?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Brandt. My orders are to keep you in my sight at all times.”

“You honestly think I had anything to do with any of this?”

He shrugged. “Stranger things have happened, ma’am.”

“Not to me.” Evelyn sat on a deck chair and let her head drop into her hands. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

A rustling in the bushes pulled her attention. She stood just in time to glimpse a man with a camera pointed at her.

She spun around, head whirling, black dots at the edges of her vision. She struggled to breathe. This time she couldn’t keep the panic away. It was too strong. Every coping mechanism she’d learned in therapy eluded her, and she dropped into the chair, willing away the worry.

Her heart felt like it was being squeezed. Her airway, blocked. Her mind spun out of control, unable to latch on to one sane thought.

For a split second she was in her parents’ house again, hiding under the bed, hoping her father didn’t find her. He wouldn’t

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abuse her—not physically—but he would tell her what a disappointment she was. He would point out that she wasn't living up to her potential, that what she needed was hard work and discipline. He would make her feel like the failure she was.

I'll never be good enough.

“Mrs. Brandt?” Agent Todd leaned in. “Are you okay?” He turned to the man with the camera and shooed him away. “Get out of here. I can arrest you. This is private property.”

The cameraman rushed off.

“He's gone, Mrs. Brandt.” Agent Todd stood a few feet away. “Do you need a doctor?”

Slowly Evelyn's panic subsided. It had been months since she'd had a panic attack, but they never got any easier. “I'm fine. I just want to be alone.”

He lingered for a moment as if to assess her condition. “I'll wait over here,” he said finally. “By the door.”

But knowing she remained under his watchful eye was enough to prevent her from relaxing. That, coupled with the fact that her entire world had just come crumbling down around her, made Evelyn feel like she might never truly be at peace again.

A Note from the Author



WHEN I FIRST HAD the idea for *Change of Heart*, I knew it would be difficult to write. Essentially, I thought, the book is about a man who's in love with a married woman. Tricky for someone writing Christian fiction, no?

But as I began to peel away the layers, I started to see that while this is a part of the battle my hero faced, it's only a part—and at its core, this book is about surrendering our will to whatever God has for us. Even when the answers aren't ones we want to hear. Even when everything seems to go completely wrong. Even when every choice we make seems to be the opposite of what we should've made.

I'm not very good at surrendering.

I've lived a fairly self-sufficient life, but in the past few years, I've realized that this isn't a badge of courage I want to wear. I don't want to be the one who has everything all figured out because it leaves no room for God to work in me. I would much rather readily admit I have no idea what I'm doing and can't do any of this life stuff without him.

My prayer for this book is that it will not only give you a few hours of peaceful escape, but that it will also help you, dear reader, take a look at the regrets you've been carrying with you and finally

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lay them down. No matter what story you're telling yourself, the truth is our choices don't define us—thankfully.

And while the human heart tends to be fickle, God's heart toward us never changes.

I pray you rest in his unending grace.

Courtney