



Paper
Hearts



a novel



COURTNEY WALSH

PRAISE FOR
Paper Hearts

AND OTHER NOVELS BY COURTNEY WALSH

“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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ALSO BY COURTNEY WALSH

A Sweethaven Summer

A Sweethaven Homecoming

A Sweethaven Christmas



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Paper Hearts

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For all of our Studio kids.

*May your dreams be big enough to scare you . . . because
the good stuff is on the other side of fear.*

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CHAPTER

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“I CAN’T BELIEVE she did this to me again.” Abigail Pressman stared at the computer screen in disbelief. Her own photo stared back, her pasted-on smile frozen in time.

“I can’t believe you still own a pair of overalls.” Mallory leaned down over her shoulder, eyes wide at Abigail’s most recent public humiliation. “Not flattering.”

“Understatement.” Abigail covered her face with her hands.

The four other dating websites were bad enough, but one exclusively for farmers? Abigail sighed. “I’ll never recover from this one.”

Elizabeth “Teensy” Pressman had two goals in life: first, to marry off all her children; and second, to have lots of grandbabies. It seemed the woman would stop at nothing until both were accomplished.

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“I think she means well,” Mallory said, her wince audible.

Abigail groaned. Last month it had been a setup at her mother’s bridge club with Eunice Middleton’s forty-five-year-old son, Jasper, who lived two hours away in Denver.

Which left Abigail wondering, shouldn’t a woman with a name like Eunice know better than to name her child Jasper? Of course, who was she to talk with a mother who went by “Teensy”? The nickname she had picked up as the youngest and smallest of eight children had never gone away. Jasper, it turned out, wasn’t interested in Abigail any more than she was interested in him. Jasper had already found the love of his life, a tattoo artist who called herself Topsy. In addition to being happily unmarried, he was also a wretched coward who couldn’t tell his mom about his live-in girlfriend.

Abigail peered at her own photo on the laptop screen on the counter in front of her. “She has officially lost her mind.”

“Do you think it costs money to sign up for these websites? She’s got to have a fortune in it. What is this, number four?”

“Five. Don’t forget the Young Loves Park Professionals site, which is local and even more embarrassing than FarmersOnly.”

Mallory shrugged. “City folks just don’t get it.”

Abigail grimaced. “Is that their slogan?”

Her store manager pointed at the screen. “Yep. See, the logo’s right here beside your straw hat and braids.”

Abigail only stared.

“The cow’s a nice touch.”

Teensy had clearly dug this one out of the archives. Abigail in the cow pasture next door to her parents’ house during a church picnic, her dark hair pulled into two braids. There happened to be a cow in the background, which, she supposed, enabled her mom to pass her off as a farm girl.

“We have to explore every avenue, Abigail,” her mother would say. “You’re not getting any younger, and Loves Park is only so big.”

“I’m wearing flannel in this picture, Mom,” Abigail would say in protest.

“But your teeth look so white.”

Again Abigail entertained the thought that she should move somewhere else, but not for the reasons her mother suggested. She had always dreamed of living in the city—or at least in a more sizable town. Loves Park, a small community known for its celebration of all things romantic, had targeted Abigail—single and almost thirty—like a cheetah eyeing a limping wildebeest.

As if she needed to be reminded of her inability to find the right guy and settle down. As if romance were the only thing she should want out of life. How barbaric to assume that. Yet here she was, living and working in Loves Park—a town that wouldn’t let her forget even for a moment who she was.

Maybe a fresh start was what she needed. Denver wasn’t too far a drive, yet it felt a whole world away from here.

But as quickly as the idea entered her mind, reality bumped it out of the way. Her father had entrusted The Book Nook to her upon his death. It was the only thing that had ever connected the two of them when he was alive: a shop full of books. Perhaps it was a silly legacy. It certainly hadn’t made her wealthy and it wouldn’t change the world. But it was all she had left of him, and she wasn’t about to let it go. Besides, she had a plan to expand her little shop—a plan that had once felt like a whisper on the wind but that might actually come to pass.

Two months before, her landlady, Harriet, who ran a mercantile in the other half of the building, told Abigail she’d decided to retire and shut down the mercantile. Abigail received the news with the appropriate amount of sadness, amazed at her own ability to act forlorn when, in truth, she fought to contain her joy. Of course she’d miss the shop next door—Harriet was a kind woman, and her two sons were always bringing home the most unique items from their worldwide travels. But it meant that finally—*finally*—she

could expand her own store. She could already see the expansion in her mind. She'd visualized it every time she walked into the mercantile.

Abigail had already decided how to transform one of the mercantile's walls into a gallery of her favorite local artists. She knew exactly where she would display vintage treasures and handmade jewelry. And in her spare time, she'd already refinished a number of flea-market furniture discoveries that customers were sure to love. Abigail was sure The Book Nook could be much more than a tidy, cozy shop packed with wall-to-wall books. Adding the café with local gourmet coffee last year was a nice touch, but her dream was more venti than tall.

Plus, she'd finally be owner, not tenant, and something about that made Abigail grow a bit inside. Wyatt Nelson, premier Realtor of Loves Park, had given his word she'd be the first to know of any interest in the property, but his offer was about to expire. "The sign is going up in ten days," he'd recently told her in his I'm-a-very-busy-man voice.

She made a mental note to pester Harvey at the bank and find out what on earth was taking him so long. Once that sign went up, stiff competition would follow. Loves Park, nestled up in the Rocky Mountains, was prime real estate. The picturesque backdrop and nearby national parks brought thousands of tourists to their little town each year. Add to that the never-ending celebration of romance, and much to Abigail's dismay, Loves Park became a prime location for weddings, honeymoons, and those looking to rekindle what they once had. Despite how she felt about the endless supply of couples, it all contributed to the fact that Abigail's building, right in the heart of Old Town, was one of the most desirable within city limits.

"So what do you want me to do about this profile?" Mallory asked, pulling the laptop to her.

Abigail shot her a look. "Delete it. Please?"

“Working on it.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Abigail saw someone walk past the side window. She turned toward it. “Is that Aaron?”

Mallory barely glanced up, fingers tapping on the keyboard. “Is it twenty after?”

“I think it’s just now seven.”

“Then he’s not here.” Mallory punched a few more keys and leaned back, triumphant.

“Do something about that, will you?” Abigail hoisted her bags over her shoulder and started for the office.

“Like, fire him?” Mallory shut the laptop and stashed it underneath the counter.

“He’s too cute to fire. Just give him a warning or whatever.” Abigail let the office door swing closed behind her, not wanting to hear Mallory’s dry retort—something like, “Because that worked so well the last time.” Who needed the reminder that she was a soft boss?

Abigail sank into her desk chair, the quiet solace of her office washing over her. *Another dating site? Really, Mom?*

In that moment, the embarrassment of being the black sheep of Loves Park’s romantic tradition washed over her like cold water from a bucket. Why had God seen fit to give everyone but Abigail their Mr. Right, despite her years of praying, despite knowing she’d make someone a perfect wife? At least she hoped she would. Correction. She *had* hoped she would. She wasn’t sure about much anymore. No sense pining away for something—someone—that might not exist.

Being twenty-nine and single might be difficult for any woman in *any* town, but Abigail had to believe that she had it just a little bit worse than most. Not only was she Teensy’s pet project, she was living in a town named by her great-great-grandparents as a celebration of their cherished love story. And that town had one obsession: romance.

Double whammy.

A loud knock startled her. Mallory didn't wait for her to answer, instead pushing the door open and poking her head in. "Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

Abigail stared at her. Had she forgotten to turn the light on?

"Sorry, my hands were full," she said, wondering if that counted as a lie. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"You left the front unattended to come back here for nothing?" Abigail stood, smoothing her peasant top and the blazer she'd thrown on at the last minute in an attempt to make herself more professional than bohemian, the familiar struggle that plagued her every time she got ready for work. Always striving to be taken seriously as a business professional when her natural tendencies were far more casual.

"No, Aaron just got here." Then Mallory stared at her with that familiar grimace.

"What now? A want ad in the *Loves Park Daily News*?" Before long, her mother would have a spot on channel five about her daughter's inability to find a husband in a town with *love* in the name. Worse, around here it just might play as a valid story.

"No, it's not that," Mallory said. "I think there's something you should see."

Mallory's tone rattled her, and Abigail fought the hollow worry that settled in her gut. She waited a moment before following her manager to the front of the store. The sun illuminated the large space, casting warmth and light across the rows and rows of bookshelves, some along the wall, others neatly positioned throughout the store. Abigail reached the coffee counter and stopped, following Mallory's gaze through the glass.

While their view was partially obstructed from this angle, it was clear something was going on next door. Harriet had moved out a few weeks prior, so that wasn't it.

Abigail dared a few cautious steps toward the oversize front window, the pit in her stomach warning her of impending doom.

Wyatt Nelson stood outside. Next to him was a man wearing jeans and a North Face jacket. She couldn't make out the stranger's face, but she saw sales pitch all over Wyatt's.

"What is he doing?" Abigail crossed her arms over her chest, begging herself to calm down.

Just then, Gerald and Anita Jensen strolled in from off the street.

"Looks like you've got a new neighbor," Gerald said, grinning at Abigail.

Anita walked right up to Abigail and squeezed her arm. "A *handsome* neighbor too." She smiled. "And no wedding ring. I checked. You should get out there and be charming." A wink in Abigail's direction and the older couple headed to the coffee counter. She barely heard them place their coffee and muffin order with Aaron.

"He promised I had ten more days," Abigail said, her voice barely audible.

"Why don't you go say something?" Mallory asked, still staring at the two men on the street. "Maybe it's not what it looks like."

Abigail sent Mal a sad look. They both knew it was exactly what it looked like.

Wyatt was going to try to sell her building without honoring his word. Typical of him.

"Why does that guy have to look at our building?" Mallory's shoulders dropped. "Aren't there a dozen more on the market right now?"

Abigail hadn't been paying attention to the other downtown storefronts. Her brick building on the corner provided the perfect bookend for a block of equally unique shops, all independently—and locally—owned. The Book Nook had been her only focus for six years, and now her vision of expanding into art-filled walls and renovated furniture was blurred.

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Abigail hated to admit it to herself, but the shop was more than a way to pay the bills and honor her father's memory. It was a diversion whenever her naked left hand bothered her—though that only happened every now and then. Some days she even convinced herself it was enough. Who needs a man when you have shelves of beautiful books and dreams of growth and success?

Her heart raced as she stared at Wyatt and the stranger from the safety of her front window. While she couldn't hear what the slimeballs were saying, she had the distinct impression from their pointing that they were now discussing *her* half of the building.

No way was she going to let this . . . this . . . *man* move into her building, steal her dreams, and force her out.

She drew in a deep breath. She didn't even know North Face, and already she considered him a horrible person.

"What are you going to do?" Mallory asked.

"I don't know, but I'm not going to let them get away with this."

She didn't believe those words. Not yet. With a little bit of courage, perhaps she could find a way.

Sadly, last time she checked, courage wasn't something she could find on the Internet, which meant somehow Abigail Pressman had to come by it naturally.

But some things just didn't come naturally to her.