

LAST SUMMER

T H E R E S A W E I R



DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

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LOVESWEPT®

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First Edition



Chapter 1

Johnnie Irish adjusted his dark, wire-rimmed sunglasses, gave a nod to the pilot, then paused in the doorway of the charter plane.

Something had definitely been lost arriving by air, he decided. To get the full effect of Hope, Texas, a guy had to approach it by land. He had to cross miles and miles of desolate desert, tumbleweeds, and broken-down shanties. He had to see all the billboards boasting two-headed snakes and five-legged lambs.

As a teenager, Johnnie and some buddies had decided to take in one of those roadside attractions. They'd plunked down a buck fifty only to discover that the snake was pickled and the lamb was stuffed. From the highly visible black stitches, they'd also decided that the freak appendage had been added by some myopic seamstress. They'd quickly pointed out the flaws in loud, boisterous voices. Doubled up with laughter, tears streaming from their eyes, they'd been kicked out of the joint—which only made them laugh all the harder.

Johnnie had been kicked out of a lot of places since then. Bars. Hotels. Restaurants.

Towns.

Hope, Texas, in particular.

Three months ago, when he'd gotten the phone call asking him to be the main attraction in Hope's homecoming parade, he'd laughed out loud, right into the receiver. But then he thought it over awhile and the temptation proved too much. He'd been harboring a bitterness toward his hometown for a long time, and wouldn't revenge be sweet? So, fifteen years after being tossed out on his ass, he'd decided to come back.

Desert wind, not yet heated by the day, felt good against his skin. He'd forgotten how clear and untainted the air here was. He took a moment to pull some of that air deep into his lungs.

He could see the promised car waiting for him—the parade convertible. Standing beside it, shading her eyes with one hand, was a dark-haired woman. For a second, panic thumped in his chest while his mind spun backward to his childhood and all its horrors. For a second, he thought the woman standing by the car was his mother, then his head cleared and he remembered she was dead. He let out his breath in relief.

Maggie Mayfield watched as Johnnie Irish stepped from the plane. They had agreed to meet at the private airstrip in order to keep his arrival place secret.

Even from a distance she could see that his hair was too long, his jeans too faded. They weren't the kind of jeans that had been made to look old. These *were* old. They'd most likely been dark blue when purchased, but through the years they had faded and conformed to the contours of his body until they were a part of him. Besides the decrepit jeans, he was wearing a red and white baseball jacket and leather high-top sneakers.

She thought of all the ruffles and patent leather waiting along the parade route and felt a stab of irritation. He could have at least dressed up a little.

Right from the start, she'd been against inviting Johnnie Irish to their community. Hope was surrounded by mile after mile of desert. To the south, the nearest town, Little Burgundy, was forty-five miles away. Its claim to fame was a twin movie theater and a brand-new Piggly Wiggly. Some sixty miles to the north was Black River. Its only building was a combined tavern and gas station.

There was no fast lane in Hope, Texas. Sure, the kids drank,

and Maggie knew that drugs had filtered their way into town. That kind of thing was everywhere. But she'd like to think it wasn't nearly as bad in Hope as it was other places.

So why had they rolled out the red carpet to welcome the very type of person they prided themselves in being without? Why had they invited Johnnie Irish into their midst when he was the embodiment of everything they didn't want in their town? The man stood for drugs and sex and alcohol. He was known for his loud, drunken parties and his flagrant disregard for the law and other people's property. In short, he was a bad example—the *worst* example for their young people—and she'd told the town council so.

"It isn't every town that can brag that they helped raise a movie star," George Bailey had argued.

"And think of the money he'll bring in," Mabel French had added. "Think of the excitement, the life! We need some excitement and life in Hope."

In the end they'd taken a vote and Maggie had lost six to one. And since she was the head of the parade committee, she now had the dubious honor of escorting their guest into town.

She watched as he strolled leisurely toward her, watched as a lizard skittered in front of him, across the cracked cement to disappear behind a tumbleweed.

Maggie had never had the desire to see a Johnnie Irish movie. Screwball comedies didn't appeal to her. Not that she was against silliness. She just preferred deeper, meaningful stories. But she'd seen a lot of magazine photos of him, plus interviews on a couple of morning shows. Enough to be prepared for Johnnie Irish's celebrity arrogance and celebrity good looks. She was even prepared in case he decided to turn his lady-killer charm in her direction—not that she thought he would. She wasn't his type. She was too flat, too straight up and down. Too plain.

From interviews she knew his voice would be deep and bluesy, with just a hint of a drawl left over from his Hope, Texas, days. She knew that his body and face would be fascinatingly perfect. Well, not mannequin perfect, or classically perfect. No, not classical. But then classical didn't make a woman's pulse quicken. Dangerous. Dangerous was what made a woman's pulse quicken.

From a certain angle, his nose appeared a little crooked, most likely broken in a fight. Beneath dark, slashing brows his eyes were as blue as the Texas sky, but not as clear. There was something in them . . . something secretive. Maybe a holding back . . . or maybe a seductive promise . . .

She'd always figured that the camera was kind to him. Some people just photographed well. Nobody could really *look* like that.

But now, as the distance closed between them, she discovered that the camera hadn't done him justice. And with dismay, she found herself falling victim to his looks just like one of her star-struck high school students. For the first time in years, she actually regretted the flatness of her chest.

He was a few yards away when her brain went comatose. She could feel her knees begin to tremble, her heart begin to pound in her ears.

And then he was there, standing in front of her, the rounded toes of his sneakers lined up opposite her leather taupe pumps. She looked up. She couldn't see his eyes through the dark sunglasses. She hated talking to someone who was wearing dark glasses. Worse yet were glasses with mirrors where all you saw was a distorted image of yourself.

As she fumbled in her mind, trying to dredge up her practiced words of greeting, her hair whipped across her mouth. She pulled back the lank strands, securing them at her neck with one hand. "I'm Maggie Mayfield. Welcome to Hope!" How eloquent. And it really wasn't Hope at all. They were ten miles from Hope.

"Hope." He braced his hands on his hips and did a slow pan of the stark, desert landscape. Nothing but sand and sky, scrub pine and yucca . . . and goatheads that stuck to the soles of your shoes. He rocked on his heels. "A nothing town in the middle of one giant litterbox."

What a perfectly horrid thing to say. Not exactly the words she'd expected. Certainly not the words she'd relate to the *Hope Chronicle* when they interviewed her tomorrow. But his opening comment had been good for one thing. Her knees stopped knocking and the roaring in her head ceased. Her brief star-struck moment was over. And now that her eyes were no longer clouded, she

could see that Johnnie Irish was a little lax in the grooming department. What she had at first mistaken as carefully cultivated stubble was actually no more than wino neglect. And sure it was windy, but his hair looked as if he'd roared in on a Harley. And was that alcohol she smelled? Was the star of their homecoming parade drunk?

Maggie wasn't a native of Hope. She and her husband, Steven, had moved there because of his emphysema, but Maggie had quickly grown fond of the little town. Even after Steven's death she had stayed on. And now she couldn't help but jump to Hope's defense. "How can you talk that way about a town that helped shape who you've become?"

He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and looked down the highway that led to Hope, Texas. "That's why I *can* talk," he mumbled, more to himself than to her . . . or maybe he was speaking to the town itself. "I've got a right."

She didn't understand. Once again she thought about all the excited, expectant people waiting along Main Street. She thought about their months of preparation and how the whole town had gotten into the spirit of things. She thought about the huge banners draped across the street: HOPE WELCOMES JOHNNIE IRISH. JOHNNIE IRISH DAY. WELCOME HOME, JOHNNIE IRISH.

What a slap in the face.

People had come hours early just to get a good spot. At this very moment they were standing near curbs, waiting, camera in one hand, the colorful confetti they'd spent late-night hours shredding and cutting in the other.

They were waiting to welcome home a hero, not some overgrown brat hurling out insults instead of smiles.

"This whole thing will take an hour, tops," she told him, her voice loud and clear. "All you have to do is wave and smile. When the parade is over, we'll put you in a car and whisk you back to the plane."

He moved past her, reaching for the driver's door. "Okay, then. Let's go do it."

"Oh no you don't." She cut in front of him, guarding Cora Stevenson's classic Caddy. "I drive," she said, her gaze never wavering from his dark glasses.

She had the feeling that the eyes behind them were scanning her quite thoroughly. She didn't like the sensation. But she was glad she hadn't given in to the urge to conceal her nose freckles with makeup, or have her hair done. She certainly didn't want him to get the wrong idea and think she'd taken any extra care over her appearance because of him.

"I don't remember you," he said with childlike bluntness. "You from Hope?"

"I moved here a few years ago. But even if I'd always lived here, I doubt you would have remembered me. I'm sure we would have run in different circles."

One side of his sensual mouth turned up and he nodded slightly, as if agreeing. He took off his glasses, and now she could see why he'd chosen to wear the dark lenses in the first place: to hide the condition of his eyes—which a generous dose of red-chasing eyedrops wouldn't begin to cure. She thought of an apt description for the *Chronicle*. *The bright red of his jacket perfectly matched his eyes.*

And yet her sarcasm was tempered with something else—irritation, possibly. What made a person so self-destructive? Did he think so little of himself? Or was he just too caught up in the fast lane to stop?

"I know how we can settle this," he said. "We'll do the rock, paper, scissors thing. You win—you drive. I win—I drive. Ready? One, two—"

She just stood there, staring at him.

"Come on," he coaxed, holding out a fist between them. "You know how to play, don't you?"

"Of course I do." This was too ridiculous.

"One—"

Grudgingly she put her fist beside his.

He smiled. "Two. Three!"

His fist remained closed, hers open. He was rock, she was paper.

He flashed her another ornery grin and shrugged. "That crazy paper."

"Yeah," she agreed a little feebly, feeling somewhat bemused. "That crazy paper."

She wasn't really conscious of movement, but suddenly she was sliding behind the Cadillac's huge steering wheel. She started the engine, then maneuvered the boat of a car onto the deserted highway, cringing when the rear tires squealed as they made contact with pavement. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't used to driving anything with power, and she preferred it that way. Right now she longed for the familiarity of her Volkswagen Beetle.

Her passenger let out a taunting laugh. "Sure you don't want me to drive?"

"No thanks. I want to live long enough to spot Elvis working at the local A&W."

He laughed again. Who was the comedian here anyway? And what had gotten into her? She was never sarcastic.

He leaned forward and flipped on the radio, spinning the dial through several stations until he came to one he was apparently searching for. Then he settled back in the seat while rock music vibrated in the dashboard and the wild wind whipped his hair about his head. His right elbow was resting on the window frame while his hand weaved up and down, fingers pointing into the wind, riding the air currents.

"Who took the horny toad queen this year?" he yelled over the noise of the wind and the radio.

She had no answer for that, so she pretended not to hear him. Instead, she kept her eyes focused on the water mirages crawling across the pavement in front of them.

"Becky May was so honored, last I knew," he informed her. "It was actually a toss-up between her and Selma Johnson. They both spent quite a bit of their senior year on their backs."

He was more incorrigible than any of her students.

"Craig Ferguson still live around here?"

Something she could answer. "He's a car salesman at the Chevrolet dealership."

"No kidding? I always figured he'd end up discovering a cure for the common cold or something. Don't get me wrong. Craig was an okay guy. Kind of a pencil neck, but okay. Now, his old man was another story altogether." A pause. For effect? "Kicked me out of Hope High."

"What a surprise," Maggie drawled.

“He still principal?”

“Yes.”

“The world keeps turning, but old Hopeless just stays the same.”

“Sometimes it’s all right to stay the same. Why change a good thing?”

He quit playing with the wind and turned toward her, his left arm draped across the back of the seat. “Humans need variety or else their brains stagnate. What do you do for excitement? For a buzz?”

She could tell him that she liked to play piano in a big empty room. She liked sharing quiet conversation with her friend Karen, and playing softball with Karen and her three kids. But those were joys, not the thrill-seeking he was talking about. “I don’t feel the need for a buzz,” she said. “I’m content.”

“You’re stagnant.”

It was pointless. He was too mixed-up to understand, and that made her feel a little sorry for him.

They stopped at the edge of town so he could take his place on the car body, just in front of the trunk, his feet on the back-seat.

“Smile and wave,” Maggie told him. “That’s all you have to do.”

He smiled and waved, demonstrating his remarkable skill. At that moment she could easily understand how he’d managed to charm the pants off so many women. Lucky for her, she was immune to that sort of thing. Lucky for her that she’d never been attracted to his type.

She put the car in gear. In another hour, she promised herself, this would all be over.

They had decided to put their town star near the middle of the parade, behind the Hope High marching band and directly in front of cute-as-a-button Susie Mapes and her twirling baton.

Getting into place was only a matter of edging into the opening that had been left for them. Maggie had the Cadillac in line just minutes before the police siren wailed, announcing the start of the parade.

She let out a pent-up breath. Everything was going like clockwork.

The band, comprised of horns and drums, played a most peculiar rendition of “Hey Jude,” then went on to “You Are the Sunshine of My Life.” The band instructor was new to Hope High, and it was her belief that the kids were happier playing golden-oldie Top Forty tunes. The problem was that Top Forty didn’t always translate well to horns and drums.

The parade went smoothly, with waving and clapping and much confetti-tossing. Occasionally Maggie would glance over her shoulder to find her passenger behaving. He’d put his sunglasses back on and was smiling and waving, just as he’d promised.

They were almost to the halfway point—Clark Drugstore—when from the vicinity of the backseat and very near her right ear came the metallic sound of a pop top being pulled open, followed by a suspicious hissing fizz.

She looked over her shoulder. Johnnie Irish had his head tilted back, elbow high, guzzling a beer.

What happened next was strictly reflex. Maggie forgot all about the manual transmission. She slammed on the brakes. The car shuddered, bucked, and died. Johnnie Irish let out a curse. His hands flailed. Beer sloshed. Then he disappeared over the trunk.

Time seemed to crawl and fly at once. Maggie fumbled for the door handle, shouldered open the door, then realized the car was rolling backward. She slammed her foot down on the brake pedal, at the same time remembering to turn off the ignition and pull out the emergency brake—all the while praying that she hadn’t run over Johnnie Irish.

She found him sprawled on his back, half under the car’s huge chrome bumper, mouth open, eyes closed.

Out cold.

Susie Mapes was standing nearby, clutching her baton; her eyes huge, the tassels on her white boots trembling.

In the distance a few wobbly notes of “Take a Letter, Maria” could be heard drifting on the air. Then the notes died as the solo performer most likely realized something was amiss.

Maggie crouched down at Johnnie's side. He was beginning to show signs of consciousness. His eyelids fluttered. He let out a groan.

"Don't move," she told him.

The words were barely out of her mouth when he tried to lever himself up on both elbows, winced, put a hand to his head, then sank back to the ground, face pale. "You're one helluva driver, Maggie May," he gasped.

Just when she was feeling guilty, when she was feeling that this fiasco was all her fault, something beside him caught her eye.

A syringe.

Luckily her back was to the crowd that was rapidly gathering behind them. She scooped up the syringe, hiding it against her palm and wrist—not for Johnnie's sake, but the town's.

"I think you lost something." She pressed the capped and loaded syringe against his hand, which curled around it with familiarity.

"My fix," he mumbled, relief in his voice. "Thanks."

He could hardly move, but somehow—most likely from habit—he managed to pocket the needle inside his jacket.

Up until that point, in spite of everything Maggie knew about Johnnie Irish, in spite of everything he'd said and done, she had kind of liked him. But now she felt a keen sense of disappointment, and more than a little sorrow.

All her life she'd been guilty of giving people false nobilities. She foolishly tended to imagine them the way she wanted them to be, not the way they really were. And she had started to do the same with Johnnie. Because he was so good-looking, because he had charmed her with his ornery smile, she had begun to hope he was more than what he seemed. But she should have known better. Celebrities weren't like real people. Aside from the booze and drugs, acting messed them up. It made them so they couldn't tell the difference between what was real and what wasn't.

Behind her, Maggie could hear Susie, who before today had been one of Johnnie Irish's biggest fans, trying to explain what had happened. Her voice was teary and breathless and full of shocked disbelief. "He splashed beer in my hair, and he said the F word. . . ."

Maggie sat back on her heels. "I think we better have the ambulance swing by."

Above her, a banner billowed and filled with air, the enlarged letters mocking her and the town.

WELCOME HOME, JOHNNIE IRISH.

Welcome home, indeed.

On the ground, Johnnie Irish moaned and said, "I think I'm gonna puke."



Chapter 2

Two hours later Johnnie walked out of Hope Medical Center with a slight concussion—which explained why he’d gotten sick—a couple of slightly bruised ribs, and no red carpet in sight. In fact, he’d guess that the town was probably organizing a lynching party about now.

His host, Maggie Mayfield, was long gone. He’d told her not to worry about hauling him around, he’d rent a car. She hadn’t argued. And who could blame her? He could still see the disgust on her face when that syringe had rolled out. And since it was impossible for him to pass up an opportunity to shock, he’d played it up. There was something in him that, whenever somebody said, “Oh, you’re bad,” made him want to respond, “If you want bad, I’ll show you bad.”

Now that his moment in the sun was over, now that he was no longer the center of attention, negative or otherwise, he was beginning to wonder just what the hell had gotten into him, coming back to Hope. It had been a stupid idea. But then he’d had a lot of stupid ideas in his life. Still, he should have known better. Wasn’t that what people were always telling him?

But when he’d plotted his revenge, he hadn’t thought about

people like Maggie. He hadn't thought about little kids and baton twirlers. . . .

Truth was, Hope had a bad effect on him. Always had. And now that he was back, some of his bravado was fading. Some of the old feelings, the old insecurities, were creeping in, and he didn't like it. Not one bit. He didn't want to be the kid with chronic head lice wearing his classmates' hand-me-downs. He didn't even like to be reminded that such a kid had ever existed.

He shouldn't have come.

A small crowd of die-hard fans had gathered outside, and they now approached him, one teenager stepping forward with pencil and paper in his hand to ask shyly for an autograph. Quite a switch from Los Angeles, where Johnnie was used to being mobbed. Maybe it was because of what had happened this morning. Or maybe it was the town. "Reserved" was Hope's middle name. Hope Reserved Texas. Somebody—he couldn't remember who—had said you're never a real celebrity in your hometown, because people there know you for what you really are.

Maybe it was true.

Maybe the people of Hope knew about the restlessness that ate at him, that never went away. Maybe they knew that he was full of insecurities and self-doubt. But that as long as he kept moving, kept talking, kept stirring up trouble, the insecurities were covered by the noise and confusion.

When he finished signing the autographs, he headed for the rental car that had been left at the curb. A blue Chevy sports coupe.

He slid behind the wheel, started the engine, tested the gears, then pulled away from the curb with only minimal squealing.

He was anxious to be gone, but there were a few things he had to do first, a few places he had to go.

Funny, the things you forget. Like the weird layout of the town. Since Hope was perfectly flat, the streets had been gullied so when the occasional rain came, the water had someplace to go. All the streets running east and west had ditches that crossed the intersections. Driving north and south was a little like riding a weary roller coaster.

As he turned the final corner, he could see the railroad yard with its abandoned boxcars and rusty rails. It gave him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Why was he doing this to himself? Because he had to see, had to know that the house was empty. Sometimes he had dreams. . . .

He stopped the car in front of a one-story shanty—the place where he'd spent those so-called formative years. There was a "Condemned" sign in one window, the only window with any glass.

Actually the place hadn't changed all that much. The yard was bare dirt with a few crawling goatheds. Still there was the cement stoop where he'd spent cold nights curled up like a dog while his mother entertained inside. He used to watch her boyfriends come and go, praying none of them was his father, especially Brace Cahill, the town sheriff.

He could almost hear his mother's voice, screaming at him. "Don't tell him you're my kid, you hear me? Men don't want a lady with a kid. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be living in this dump. I'd be married to some rich man."

Johnnie had eventually gotten too big to lie on the stoop. That's when he'd taken to roaming the streets at all hours. That's when he'd started getting into trouble with the cops.

She'd been insane, his mother. As a kid, he hadn't seen it, hadn't known or understood.

What angered him was knowing that Hope had turned a blind eye on a child who had needed help, and in so doing had almost sealed his fate. But there had been one person who hadn't looked away, and he knew, without the slightest doubt, that if not for that person's encouragement he would have ended up in prison. Or dead, the way the high school principal had predicted all those years ago.

Harriet Lundy. He wondered if she was still around. She'd seemed old back then. She'd have to be ancient by now.

Afternoon sunlight poured in the picture window, spilling in dust-gathering rays to the carpeted floor. With arthritic hands, Harriet straightened the doily on the back of the recliner. Beside