

Chapter 1

Harris Goddard's life ran out on an ordinary April afternoon, on the very day it seemed all the rest of the planet was pretty much pulsating with spring. An unexpected warm front had blown toward the coast overnight, pushing out the remains of the long, dry Connecticut winter and nudging all the buds into a frantic, hurried bloom, screaming at them, "So get out there already! You're late!" By 11 a.m., the thermometer on the side of the barn read 86 damp degrees, and Harris, standing on a ladder and scraping the peeling paint off his house, felt as though he had might have missed out on the memo that warned the world had slipped into the third circle of hell.

But he was a proud and stubborn old cuss and had never once changed a plan without a fight, so he stayed up there on rung number six, squinting hard in the sunlight, picking and scratching at the hide of his house, and watching the paint chips drift to the ground like old sunburned skin. By the time he decided to let himself break for lunch, he was cranky and thirsty and his left arm was tingling from holding the scraper.

He still had his winter blood, that was all this was.

"Hey, you," said his housemate, Jamie McClintock, when he went inside. He let the screen door bang behind him, for once. She was standing at the stove, dressed in a cloudy pink long skirt and tank top, her hair and face all blurry just now.

"Hey, you," he said back. With slight difficulty. She looked at him and said, "Harris, are you all right?"

He nodded and went over to the soapstone sink, where he found he couldn't remember exactly how it was you turned on the cold water faucet. Two bull elephants were standing on his chest, but that was nothing. He'd felt worse. Christ, he'd had hangovers that were worse than this.

"No, really. Are you okay?" she said. Then: "I know what. Why don't you sit down a minute? I'm going to call Al." Al was the doctor. He'd known Harris so long he made house calls for nothing.

"No. I'm just frungy," he said, and, of course she made a big deal out of that little slip of the tongue, came over and put her hand on his arm, and stared into his eyes like she was looking to see the insides of his brains. He couldn't remember what word he had meant to say. Fried? Hungry? Grungy? Actually, nothing made much sense just now.

"Come on, at least let me help you sit," she said. "You don't look right."

"Hot," he said, a little out of breath. "I just need a drink."

She turned on the faucet for him, got a glass out of the cabinet, and filled it up. “You want some ice?”

“Nah.” As it was, the water she gave him felt like a lump of melted snow going down. Anyway, what he’d meant was that he wanted an alcohol drink, a gin and tonic, that’s what. That, and then a chance to just sit down in the cool, have a little persuasive talk with these damned elephants. “Whew! So what is it, you think, about a million degrees out there?” she said, and even through his haze, he could tell she had that high little voice she used when she was trying her best to sound like everything was perfectly normal. “And wouldn’t you know, I sent the boys off to school in corduroy pants and sweaters. Can you imagine? They’re going to melt.”

The boys: Jamie’s son Arley and his grandson Christopher. They were five years old, and at the thought of them, his chest tightened even further. If they were here, there’d be none of this sitting around, waiting for the strength to get up and make a gin and tonic. No, on any ordinary day, he’d be laughing and chasing them around the room, and they’d be giggling and climbing all over him, pulling him up, trying to talk him into letting them climb up on the ladder, tugging at his beard. They saw him as a piece of living, breathing playground equipment, and he didn’t try to make them see any different. Every afternoon for the whole last year, he’d met their school bus and spun them around in the driveway, then pretend-raced them to the back door, where Jamie was waiting for them.

Christ, he had to get himself better before three-fifteen. That was all there was to it. He exhaled, wondered if Jamie would get all crazy alarmed if he just slid down onto the floor, maybe curled up in the fetal position underneath the table until the boys came home, or if that would make her start giving him the oh-what-a-pathetic-old-man-he-is look. He caught her doing that sometimes, which was ridiculous because he was only sixty-eight years and some change, actually only two days older than Robert Redford, and hardly anybody was putting Redford in the pathetic category just yet. Hell, he still got the girl in most movies.

Harris took another ice-cold swig of water and looked at her, managed one of the sly grins he was sort of famous for. Locally famous, at least. He was known in town as something of a rake. Besides which—maybe not right this minute, but if the truth be told, Harris thought he looked a little better than Redford did on most days: he had the same weathered tan skin and blond-gray hair, and yes, the trademark sexy grin that women still appreciated—but, of the two of them, most people if they were being really honest about it, would have to agree that Harris had the better body. Nothing puffy or doughy about him. He’d done construction his whole life, that’s why, kept himself in shape, while Redford had just ridden around on horses, directed some films, gone fishing a lot.

Besides that, Harris was even raising his grandson. Now that’ll keep you young. He wasn’t just a visiting grandpa either, one of those who sat in the chair, puffed on a pipe, and read stories. Not him. He was the Real Deal, the top banana, the center ring emcee in this kid’s life. Ask anybody in town. They’d tell you the same: Harris had been both mother and father to Christopher since the kid was four days old. That was when Harris’s daughter-in-law, who had always been kind of a depressed type anyway, if you asked him, had gone all crazy mad with hormones or something, and gone storming out of here, jumped in the car, and roared off down the road, and wouldn’t

you know, she'd tried to get on the highway going in the wrong direction and had been killed right on the exit ramp—and his son Sam, out of his mind with guilt and certainly fucked up beyond all reason, had lit out two weeks later like he had a firecracker under his ass. Gone to get his head straight, he said. Reassess things. Be back when I can.

Yeah, well...that coming back part. Not so much.

The elephants suddenly kicked Harris so hard he nearly buckled under. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the pain to subside. His head felt like a herd of buffalo was running across it.

“Maybe you're hungry,” said Jamie. He looked and saw that she was across the room now, standing by the stove. He was sitting down—when did that happen?—and he was surprised to see that he was still holding his glass of water.

“Shall I make you some lunch?” she said.

“Nah.” He pointed to his middle, grimaced. “Got some...some...indigestion.” She was frying up something on the stove, something that smelled evil, like garlic and onions and olive oil, but now she turned off the burner and came over and sat down across from him and studied him. “Indigestion, huh? Listen, I tell you what. Why don't you go upstairs to my room, the good room, and turn on the air conditioner and lie down up there for a while and get cooled off? I'm going to call Al and have him check you out.”

He turned and looked at her. Her wide, milky white face, curly yellow hair, blue eyes swimming in and out of focus. Her mouth was open, smiling, talking softly. He felt her cool hand on his arm. It was a whole year now since she and her boy Arley had moved in with him and Christopher. And yes, he had given her the good room, the upstairs bedroom with the air conditioner, because it seemed the polite thing to do. He may have been a lout and a cad and a rascal in his time, but damn it, where women he wasn't married to were concerned, he was courtly and charming. Point of pride with him. So what that this particular woman hadn't been a lover, one of the few in his life who wasn't?

When she'd moved in, she'd been just an acquaintance of his, just one of the moms whose kids were enrolled with his grandboy in the Junior Campfire Boys Club for Preschoolers, or something like that. He never could remember the exact name of the damned organization it, it was just one of those make-work things people today just couldn't get enough of, was his loudly voiced opinion, but apparently you had to join stuff these days if you wanted your kid to make it in the world. Further evidence of the decline of American civilization: you couldn't just send kids out to play on their own anymore. You had to enroll them in play.

They both, he and Jamie, had been different from everybody else there so they got to talking. She was a newcomer to town, one of those so-called New Wave of artists who all the locals said had ruined the downtown, bringing in art galleries where Moe's Hardware and Sal's Dress Shoppe used to be, and even a Starbucks right in the very spot where Larry Mooney had run a diner for forty-seven years. So naturally nobody was going to talk to her; hell, you'd think she was personally responsible for the fact that the town was now divided up between people who knew

what “grande double soy latte” meant and those that would rather cut their tongues out than even say those words. He didn’t fit in either, not exactly the demographic of an ordinary dad, so nobody knew what to say to him. The two of them got friendly one afternoon—might have been the second meeting—when they stood together at the back of the room, watching all the other ridiculous parents who were trying too hard to make sure their little tykes got to be first and best in everything, and their eyes met and she looked like she was about to bust out laughing. Kindred spirits.

It wasn’t until after they’d been going to the meetings for a few months and taking the boys out for ice cream afterward that one day she told him she was looking for a new place to live on account of her sister Mimi had let some guy move into their apartment, and this guy smoked, and Arley had asthma, and oh, it was just a big mess over there. She wasn’t complaining or anything, just telling him like this was information he might need to have. No whining. He liked that about her. He’d looked down at his hands and cleared his throat a few times and then told her that if she really needed a place...well, he had some room, he and Christopher were pretty much just rattling around in that big old farmhouse of his. And, hey—when he thought about it later, he realized it had been a damn good idea, one of his finest moments actually. The boys were already best friends, and even though Harris was doing just fine on his own, he was sick of his own cooking and his own company.

His friend Cooksey, who also just happened to be the police chief so he had about five times the number of suspicions that other people had, told Harris he knew this type, and that she was a gold digger. What a laugh. “Might as well get something out of it, you old fool,” were his exact words. “She’s asking for it, living with you under your roof.” But what the hell did Cooksey and the old coots know about being friends with a woman?

Harris didn’t think she was a gold digger. She’d had bad luck with men, but she was down-to-earth and practical, and it was great to have her standing barefooted in his kitchen at night when the boys were in bed, painting her landscapes from photographs and listening to classical music. Besides that, she cooked wonderful food and she knew just how to play with the boys, and she could talk to Harris without being all fake-nice and unnatural like most women acted to him. Plus, she listened, really listened, to all his stories, and told him stories back, and she laughed at his jokes and poked fun at him. She thought he was wise, so why mess that up by sleeping with her and proving her wrong?

She and the boys—they were his family now, and they’d tamed him. His eyes welled up.

“Harris, go on upstairs,” she was saying. “Go on, you crazy old man. Listen. I’ll even throw in a back rub.”

A back rub. He laughed.

“Yeah. Laugh all you want, you old galoot. I’ve been trained in them,” she said. “Adult ed course. Nobody better than me at it. You’re in for a treat.” He felt a little flicker of wonder through his haze. Did back rub really mean *back rub* to her, or had she picked this moment when he was more bent-over and washed up than he’d ever been in his whole life to take things up a

notch and—well, do it with him? That would be some kind of weird but lovely irony, wouldn't it?

He looked over at her, at her wavery blue eyes, wide with feeling, saw her brush back the tendrils of her long blond hair and tuck them into her ponytail. Her cheeks were flushed the color of peaches. He could barely catch his breath, he felt such a vast expanse of love just then—for her, for everything.

Love, that was all there was. It sounded so ridiculous, but this whole kitchen, this whole town, the Starbucks lattes and everything, everything was made up of it, and he couldn't think why he hadn't seen this before. He saw then a flash picture of Maggie by the stove, half-laughing at him over something he'd said, the old wife-o-saurus; then, flash, the picture shifts and he saw Sam standing here jiggling the baby and, oh no, Sam is crying, wearing an old ratty T-shirt and four days of beard growth, and shift again, and it's Harris holding the baby, but the baby isn't poor motherless Christopher, it's Sam, he's just been born, and Harris doesn't know how to make him calm, so he's singing his high school fight song, which doesn't work; flash, the red linoleum is all curled up in the corners and he loves it, that and even the worn place where Maggie had stood so many days and nights, washing dishes at the sink, and the peeling paint on the walls, the wainscoting coming loose in the corner, all the things he didn't do are still not done, but it doesn't matter. Harris can see all the winters and summers here, all rolled into one big moment, himself walking up the path from the river the first time he caught a trout, the wood smoke from the stove, the way the buttery sunlight comes slanting in and hits the kitchen cabinets just so on autumn mornings, he feels the snap in the air, and now the heaviness of the wet humidity, so heavy today you can't breathe it in, but it's okay. All of it good. All so very good. There'd been no need to fix all this; it was right just the way it was. My God, he thought, it was love. Who knew it was love right along?

He leaned suddenly forward to reach Jamie, tipping himself into the depths of her blue eyes so far he thought he might fall into them, and said happily, even though his voice felt like it was stuck somewhere in his throat, he said, "One thing to know."

She just looked at him. He tried to remember what he had been about to say about all the love.

"I'll help you up the stairs," she said. "Can you make it?" Can he make it? Can he make it? He laughed so hard at that. "Bring," he said. A moment went by. He started again. "Bring," he said, "a gin and tonic."

"I will," she said.

I will. Like what they say at weddings.