

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *LOOKING BACK*

A Dell Export Edition

BELVA PLAIN




HER FATHER'S HOUSE

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HER
FATHER'S
HOUSE

A Dell Book 

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After the Fire
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The Carousel
Daybreak
Whispers
Treasures
Harvest
Blessings
Tapestry
The Golden Cup
Crescent City
Eden Burning
Random Winds
Evergreen

HER
FATHER'S
HOUSE



Prologue



One day when I was four years old, a girl in school told me that my mother was not my real mother. "Your real one's dead," she said.

Is it not strange that I cannot remember what explanation my father gave me when I ran home? I only remember that it was raining hard. I was all wet, and at the front door the cat was crying to be let in.

PART
ONE



Chapter 1



1968

His name was Donald Wolfe, Donald J., for James, and he was twenty-five years old when he joined the stream of eager youth that from every corner of the country, every year, pours into the churning human sea called New York. If it is ever possible, or even makes any sense to say that someone's geographic origin can be visible on his person, then it made sense to say that Donald looked like just the man to have come from healthy small-town or farming people in some cold place like North Dakota—which is exactly where he had come from.

He was tall, brown-haired, and large-boned; his brown eyes were thoughtful and calm. On the streets of New York during those first months, he walked with slow deliberation through the impatient crowd, taking his time to estimate the height of a building or pausing to wonder at the heaped-up splendors in the shop windows. Untempted, he merely wondered.

Once only was he tempted. In a bookstore's window lay the *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, bound in dark red leather. It was expensive, yet the price did not faze him

too much, for he hoped to build a library and he also felt that he owed himself one treat, so he bought it.

Never in his life had he had so much money at his command. Having graduated second in his class at law school, he had been hired as an associate in the New York office of an international law firm. Although others in the firm complained that the city, with its high rents, expensive restaurants and entertainments, left them beggared, he, because he did not go to expensive restaurants and always bought standing room or the cheapest seats at theaters, felt rich. His clean, two-room apartment on the fifth floor of a nineteenth-century walk-up building, with an interesting view of the lively street, was satisfying to him.



Sometimes in window glass he would catch a reflection of himself on his way to work, wearing his correct dark suit with his briefcase at his side.

"I can't believe what's happened to me," he would cry out to himself, and then be amused at his own simplemindedness. Who do you think you are, anyway, Donald Wolfe? Why, there are dozens of young men just like you in any one of these towering buildings along the avenue.

Yet they were not all quite like him. Senior partners were surely known to be sparing of praise; still, before the year had passed, he had already received a good deal of it. One of the seniors, a punctilious, middle-aged man whom a few of the younger people in the office had secretly labeled "typically white shoe," took a liking to him. But even if Augustus Pratt had not taken that liking, Donald never would have scoffed at "white shoe"; to begin with, he was not exactly sure what it meant, but if it did mean what he thought—a

certain old-fashioned, formal courtesy—he would have found no fault with that.

One evening at the conclusion of *Aida*, Donald came upon Mr. Pratt in the lobby of the opera house. He was accompanied by a woman, obviously his wife, with their three half-grown children.

"Why, hello, Donald. I never knew you cared about opera."

"I do, although I still don't know much about it."

"It's never too late and seldom too early to learn. If I'd known you were here," he said as they walked out together, "we could have had some refreshments. Where were you sitting?"

"On top. As high as you can go."

"Oh. It was worth it, I'm sure, in spite of the seat."

"Yes, sir, it was."

"Well, see you in the morning. Good night, Donald."

More than once when in a later time he reflected on the chain of events that had moved him through the years, Donald wondered how differently things might have turned out if he had not met Augustus Pratt that night at the opera.

Was it the fact that I shared his tastes that impressed him enough to present me with two good seats for the rest of the season? Had that led to those informal conversations which, in their turn, had led to more swift assignments and promotions, and that, in a roundabout way had led in the end to Lillian, to marriage, and the deadly ruin that came after it?



Pratt had grown up in a small town in northern Maine. His father, like Donald's late mother, had been a teacher. He, too, had left for law school, borrowed and worked his way through it, and never returned to

the small town. It was this familiar background that made Donald feel particularly comfortable in his presence.

"Yes," Pratt said in one of those conversations, "Dakota sounds much like Maine. A hot July and August, then a long winter. My brothers and I worked all day in the potato fields. We worked so late sometimes that our mother brought our dinner to us in a pail. You, too, I suppose?"

"Except that I had no brothers or sisters, either. Mom had a summer job when school was out. When I got back from the farm where I worked, I'd make supper. If she got home first, she'd make it."

"You don't mention your father. Or am I intruding with the question?"

"Not at all. He died in France in 1944. I was a year old."

"To have a son, and never see him grow up," Pratt murmured, then gave Donald a penetrating look.

"You would have pleased him, Donald. Our profession, despite the abuses of some lawyers, still demands the highest honor and trust. You are going to be an honored name within it."



Donald was to remember another day, two years later.

"How would you like to go with me to Singapore next month? There's a bank matter there that's come to life again. We'd thought it was nicely settled, but it isn't."

"Like it, Mr. Pratt? Until I came to New York, I'd never been farther than the state capital. Oh yes, I'd like it!"

Pratt had smiled. Donald never forgot that smile, a little pleased, a little amused, and even perhaps a little bit—well, fatherly.

"You'll see a lot more than Singapore in your time, Donald."

There was so much that he needed to see, and do, and learn! The world was a thousand times larger and fuller than he could have imagined. In the courtroom as part of a team accompanying a senior partner, he saw the human tragedy and the human comedy as he had never seen them. The variety of people! The poverty and the riches! The astonishing evil and the innocence! And above it all was the majestic quest for justice.

At his desk he sat and studied the postmarks on foreign correspondence. The very names on them lured him. London and Paris evoked grand boulevards; Suriname, Bombay, or Malaysia evoked wet heat, dim rubber forests, or red-and-gold bazaars. The firm's clients had profits, losses, and myriad problems all over the world. Here were complicated puzzles with much at stake—not to mention his own job if he were to err in a report to his superiors. . . .



The bright years rolled one into the other. In the fifth year, he was approaching the time when a young lawyer either "makes partner" or knows that he never will.

"I can't talk about it yet, but I assume you have a pretty good idea," said Augustus Pratt, and changed the subject. "Do you ever think of marrying?"

Donald was startled. They were five miles above the Atlantic, flying home. And they had just been talking about the Federal Reserve. Anyway, the question was more personal than one would generally expect from Mr. Pratt.

"No," he said, stumbling over his reply. "I'm in no hurry."

"Well, you've been with us going on six years. And you haven't met anyone? I thought maybe that English girl you always see when we're in London. She seemed quite lovely that time I met her."

"You liked her," Donald said mischievously, "because she looks like Mrs. Pratt."

"Ah yes, maybe she does, a little. We'll be married twenty years next month." A soft expression crossed Pratt's face. It was remarkable to see that softness appear on features usually so firm as to have been carved. "Yes, yes, Donald, a sound, loving marriage is a man's blessing. Someplace right now there's a young woman who is going to give you great joy in life. And let me add that she will be one lucky woman."

"Well, we'll see," said Donald, wanting to end the subject. "But up till now, I haven't ever felt about anyone that I'd want to spend the rest of my life with her. Without that, I certainly wouldn't marry her."

Chapter 2



Scattered among New York's stone towers are a number of small, green oases, with seats in the shade or in the sun, depending on one's choice. Throughout the day, people come to them to read or eat a sandwich lunch, or simply to sit.

About half-past four on a warm afternoon late in April, Donald sat down in one of these oases and opened the newspaper. He was unusually tired; he had been in the office until midnight the night before and had then spent the greater part of the day in court. Debating within himself whether he ought to go back to the office or whether, it being Friday, he could afford to go straight home, take off his shoes, and stretch out, he put the paper down and shut his eyes against the lowering sun. His mood was mingled; there was the satisfaction that came of having skillfully presented a convincing argument before the court; also there was the pity that he could not help but feel for the poor guilty devil who by now must be sitting in jail, quivering as he awaited the term of his punishment.

A bright, girlish voice woke him from his thoughts.