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BELVA PLAIN

FORTUNE'S HAND

"An accomplished storyteller."—*The Washington Post*

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A DELL BOOK

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BELVA PLAIN is the internationally acclaimed author of eighteen novels. She lives in northern New Jersey.

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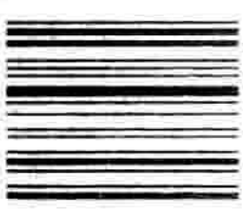

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THE GOLDEN CUP

CRESCENT CITY

EDEN BURNING

RANDOM WINDS

EVERGREEN

CHAPTER ONE

1970

He knew he was lying on the ground because there was dampness under his back, and because he smelled fresh grass. Then he heard a thrum, ceaseless as steady rain; yet, although it filled the void, it was not quite like rain, and after a while he recognized the chirp and trill of tree frogs. Spring. Tree frogs.

Out of the darkness not quite black, but darker than gray, came a voice, neither harsh nor comforting.

"Where the hell is the ambulance? You'd think he hadda come from Memphis or N' Orleans."

"Hospital's twenty-seven miles! Hey, don't touch him, I said."

"Just fixing another blanket on him. It's damn cold."

He turned his head toward the voices, but they moved away and all he could see was the night mist rising over empty space. Then pain came, and he moaned.

"Take it easy, son. You'll be okay. We're cops. You've been in a crash, but you'll be okay."

A flashlight drew a semicircle in which, for a moment, there appeared boots, trousers, and car wheels; when these receded, there were only voices again.

"The truck must have been going seventy, had a load of feed to get rid of down to Marchfield, and then get home for some shut-eye."

"You don't know that. No witnesses."

"Common sense. This poor guy here was on the interstate, had the right of way."

"Twilight. The worst time. Can't hardly see nothing, only you think you can."

"Well, none of my business. They'll talk that over down at the station house. Wouldn't want to be in the trucker's shoes this minute, though."

"Geez, take a look at the car. Makes you sick. Like stepping on a soup can."

"You've got this guy's license? Robb MacDonald, is it?"

"Yeah, MacDonald."

MacDaniel, he wanted to say. *It's MacDaniel. And my dad, and my mother?* But it took too much effort to ask, and he lay still with his pain.

"Where the hell's the ambulance? Guy could die before they get here."

Is it possible, he thought, that I am dying?

Through his long days in the hospital's high, white bed, he struggled toward acceptance of a reality that was beyond any reasonable acceptance. They had been driv-

ing home from Monroe, where his mother had just had all her long-neglected teeth extracted. In the backseat, she had been drowsing against Dad's shoulder. Pray God they hadn't felt anything! No, he was told, be assured that they had not. The truck had struck the rear half of the car, and while he, Robb, had been thrown out onto the ground, they had been crushed instantly to death.

Could it have been his fault? All he remembered was seeing the headlights emerge from the country road, part the foliage, and unbelievably shoot across his path before he could stop, or turn, or do anything but scream disaster—oh God, oh God!

It was not his fault, they told him. He must quell that doubt, quell it forever and go on with life. Why, it was close to a miracle that he had escaped with nothing more than a severe concussion and a badly broken arm and shoulder! But these would heal, and he would be in fine condition to take up his new teaching post at the consolidated high school in the fall. So they consoled, insisted, and consoled.

Meanwhile, were there any relatives or friends to assist him at home for the first few days? He had no siblings, and of relatives there were only some second cousins who had moved away up north or out across the Mississippi. There were, however, friends enough to help out a little—not that he would need much help after the first couple of days, for he was used to doing almost anything that needed doing, especially after Dad's mild though enfeebling stroke—friends and

neighbors like the Wiltons, who had the farm down the road.

"Well then, there's no reason why you can't go home tomorrow," the doctor said cheerfully at the end of the week. "Better call now and make arrangements. Any time after nine."

Lily would arrive on the stroke of the hour. On the morning after the accident, she had been there at seven, long before they would even let her in. He had to smile to himself; she was as prompt and dependable as a loving wife; indeed, he thought of her automatically as his wife, and no doubt she thought of herself that way. They had been "going together" since they were seventeen, all through the senior year in high school and after that at the Baptist college in Flemington, from which they had graduated at the end of the fall semester. But for the lack of money, they would no doubt have already been married by now.

Grateful for the relief from physical pain, Robb lay back on the pillow to reflect instead on all the varieties of emotional pain. Now that his parents were dead, he had probably been thinking more deeply about them than he had in all the years of living with them. Certainly he had cared and understood the struggle on their poor little farm; he had pitied Dad's failure with the gas pump when an efficient competitor, a full-service station with trained mechanics opened in the village; he had helped out every day after school; he had earned enough to pay his own way through college. They had had joy from him. But was that enough? Was there nothing more in life than to rear a child and take plea-

sure in his pleasure? They had had so little for themselves.

Mostly, he thought about his mother. It came to him, now remembering, that she must never have slept a full night through. He could still see the clock on his dresser when he awoke early; a quarter past five, it would read. Downstairs, she would be shaking the fire and clattering the frying pan. The henhouse door used to clack in its flimsy frame when she went for the eggs. She was a country woman. He would always remember her scattering grain to her flock of Leghorns or hoeing the corn in her kitchen garden, where the fleshy squash lay among the rows.

"Spring is yellow," she said, planting the yard with daffodils and pruning the forsythia.

It seemed to him, too, that she must sometimes have sat down to read because she could quote poetry: *I wandered lonely as a cloud*—How, given the circumstances of her life, had that ever come about?

"You're like your mother," Dad used to say. "She'd have her nose in a book all the time if she could."

Lily was like her. Do they not say that a man, without being aware of it, looks for a woman who reminds him of his mother? Yes, maybe so. Lily, too, could be bright and brisk. She, too, could dream over flowers, and often did. With all her childish pug nose and wide, smiling mouth, had he not even named her "Flower Face"?

Pink and white and so small she was that his fingertips could meet around her waist. Flower Face.

"It's good to see you smiling," the doctor said, coming in.

People are so good, Robb thought. The Wiltons, Isaac and Bess, had taken care of everything while he was in the hospital, from the funeral arrangements to the feeding of the chickens. Between these friends and Lily, with her mother, he had been not fed, but overfed. And now, through the kitchen door, came Lily and Mrs. Webster, bearing more nourishment covered with a white towel.

"Corn bread," said Mrs. Webster, plunking it down on the table. "Still warm enough if you eat it right away. Heat up the coffee, Lily, and take it out on the porch. It'll do Robb good to sit outside. He's been indoors long enough."

Both touched and amused, he saw that since his own mother was gone, she was determined to mother him.

"I've already had breakfast," he said. "Young Ike came over last night and fixed the coffeepot so all I had to do was turn on the gas. It's surprising what you can do with only one hand."

With Mrs. Webster, there was no arguing. "Well, you can have a second breakfast. I'm in a rush with a million things to do at home, but Lily can stay and keep you company. I'll be back for you around four, Lily."

"The insurance fellow said he'll be here at five," Robb said.

"Be sure you don't let him swindle you."

Mrs. Webster paused with her hand on the doorknob. Lily gave Robb a twinkling glance. They were both familiar with her mother's prolonged departures.

"I suppose you'll sell this place and move into town, won't you? Now with you at the high school and Lily starting next week at the library, it would seem to make sense."

That was true. He was surely not going to raise vegetables, sell eggs, or man the gas pump. The farm would have to go. Perhaps someone else would have better luck with it. He was thinking so, feeling a touch of sudden melancholy, when a rooster crowed. He was a small bird with an arrogant strut, and they had named him "Napoleon" because he commandeered all the hens. Whoever bought the place would most likely make soup out of him. The melancholy deepened in his chest. Robb said, "I'll miss the place."

"Not after the first couple of days," Mrs. Webster said. "You'll get yourself nicely settled and move into a new life."

He knew that she understood him, was pleased with him, and was awaiting the marriage with pleasure. Everything augured well. Once he and Lily were in their own place, something small, snug, with many windows and many books, she would not, regardless of her innate tendencies, interfere with them. She was too smart to do that. Surely she must have known that they had been sleeping together for the last five years, yet she had never spoken a word about it. Perhaps she had even arranged this whole day's privacy for them. It was 1970, and the world was very different from what it had been when she was young.

He had not been alone with Lily since the accident,

and as soon as Mrs. Webster's car was out of the yard, he ran to her.

"Your arm!" she cried.

"Don't worry, I can do very well with one arm."

She was always as eager as he was. Having read and heard about every possible sexual posture and problem, he knew that he was lucky in that respect, too. So many women were cool and unresponsive once they were sure, or thought they were sure, of a man. Well, Lily Webster could be sure of him, God knew.

"In here or out there?" she asked.

"Out there" meant the Wiltons' small barn. Having built a new, larger barn, they had long used the old one for storage of odds and ends, machinery, and extra hay. It was their son, Ike, who, at fifteen, with a knowing wink, first suggested the loft as a "nice place for you and your girlfriend to be together and talk. Just don't set fire to the hay." He was a good kid, but like many kids, sly, and obviously liked being in on a secret with Robb, to say nothing of receiving, from time to time, a small present.

"In here," Robb said now. "It's more comfortable."

When he pulled down the shades, a liquid green shadow fell over the floor and onto the bed, which, out of consideration for Lily, he had already made tidy.

"I'll lock the door. Nobody's coming, anyway."

He watched her ritual. Unlike his way, which was to peel off fast and toss all onto the floor, hers was to remove each garment with care, to hang or to fold it, then to stand bare in the light for him to see. Her smile, like her laugh, was wide and gleaming white, but unlike

her laugh, it would quickly recede, turning soft on her mouth and in her eyes. Then they would rush together.

The insurance man, Brackett, was not much older than Robb. Six or seven years more, he estimated, would make him twenty-eight. Still, when you thought about it, those were perhaps the best years of your life, not that he had ever given much practical thought to "best years" or "life." He had simply taken for granted that he would marry, have a family—at which time Lily would give up her work in the library, while he would go on teaching in the high school. Of course, there was always a vague possibility of rising to become the school principal, but that was highly unlikely.

For the last half hour, Brackett had been churning out figures: legal costs, appeals, witnesses, value of a life as shown in actuarial tables, net worth of a lump sum, investment after taxes, consideration of deductions for dependents, were the taxes filed in a joint return, or—

Robb stirred in the uncomfortable cane-back rocker. He was sweating.

"You're getting tired," Brackett said.

"No, just hot."

"We're almost finished, anyway, ready to wrap it up."

"Why don't you leave the papers so I can think everything over?"

"Fine, fine. Let me tell you, these insurance companies—" Brackett leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I shouldn't say it because I work for one and they treat

me well, but the fact is—you won't object if I speak very frankly?"

"I want you to speak very frankly, Mr. Brackett."

"Frank. That's my name. Frank Brackett. Listen, I look around here and I see that you're not—I mean, not exactly flush. If I were in your place, I'd take this offer before they change their minds. You don't want to go into long, expensive litigation, wait for years before you get anything, and maybe end up with less than this offer. You had no witnesses. You could have been drunk and—"

"That's crazy. Anybody who knows me can tell you that drink is not one of my vices."

"No insult intended. But these things are very hard to prove or to disprove. You could have fallen asleep. Can you prove you didn't?"

"Can you prove I did?"

Brackett laughed. "Say, you sound like a lawyer yourself."

"When I was a lot younger, I used to watch court scenes in the movies and think I'd like to try a case. It seemed like a challenge, matching quick wits with somebody else's quick wits. But, as I say, I was a lot younger."

"You're only twenty-two next birthday, man! What keeps you from doing it now?"

"How can you ask? You just mentioned it yourself." Robb's good arm swept the room, the sagging, ugly sofa, the worn rag rug, and the ripped, yellow curtains. "The farm, my father's stroke, everything. I'm thankful