BELVA PLAIN

FORTUNE'S HAND

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FORTUNE'S HAND

BOOKS BY BELVA PLAIN

LEGACY OF SILENCE
HOMECOMING
SECRECY
PROMISES
THE CAROUSEL
DAYBREAK
WHISPERS
TREASURES
HARVEST
BLESSINGS
TAPESTRY
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 driving 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 pleasure 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?"

"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 I made it through college and have a good job with no loans to pay off. Very thankful."

"So you gave up the idea of law school."

"I never really let myself have the idea. I'm satisfied."

"Sometimes we only think we're satisfied," Brackett said softly. "We force ourselves to think so because we can't bear to waste our lives regretting things."

Surprised, Robb looked at him. His ankle was resting on his opposite knee. There was a hole ready to pop in the sole of his shoe. His brown hair was thinning. He looked tired. Maybe he was older than Robb had thought. And just as Napoleon's crow that morning had touched him with melancholy, now pity touched him. It must be a discouraging, dull existence, day after day to visit the troubled, the injured, the needy, and the cheats alike, then to haggle, persuade, and if possible, convince them to settle and sign. The awful sameness of it!

And exactly as if his mind had been traveling in the same direction, Brackett said, "A man gets fed up, starting out every morning to do the same thing over and over."

Robb did not answer. Emotion had slipped into an atmosphere that had been impersonal. He was not sure how it had happened. He sat still, observing the other man, following his gaze across the rug, where dust motes swirled in a puddle of sunshine. Then he

thought how the scene might appear to a person coming unexpectedly upon it: two young men in a forlorn room could be the subject of a Wyeth painting or an existentialist play.

Brackett said suddenly, "Twenty-two. I'd give something to be twenty-two again, Robb. Tall, like you, with your muscles and your head of good wavy hair."

"Thanks for all the compliments, but you can't be much older than I am."

Brackett smiled. "I can't? Try forty. I only look younger because I'm thin." He reached for a book that lay beside the lamp. "Sandburg's *Lincoln,* Volume 3. You've read the first two?"

"Yes, I get them from the library. My girlfriend's the assistant librarian."

"I read the first volume. It boggles the mind. He came from nowhere, and look what he made of himself."

"Well, we can't all be Lincoln."

The mournful tone had begun to trouble Robb. There was no point in it. This was an insurance adjustor; so let him adjust the insurance and be done with it.

Once more, the other man's mind seemed to have read Robb's. He made an abrupt change of mood, raised his head, looked directly at Robb, and proposed, "How about this? I'll figure out exactly what it will cost for three years' law school tuition and living expenses at the state university. We'll make a generous allowance for extras, clothes, medical expenses, and a little natural fun. You'll sign the release, and we'll end the whole business fair and square. How about it?"

Robb was astonished. "I told you," he replied, "I only want a lump sum for the accident. I'm here to stay. I love kids, and I'm going to enjoy teaching them."

"But you really wanted to be a lawyer."

"I dreamed of it for a while, yes, but it wasn't possible, so I forgot about it."

"You didn't forget about it. You know you didn't."

There was silence.

"And now it's possible." Brackett, with an earnestly wrinkled forehead, leaned toward Robb and spoke earnestly. "Take my offer. You can have the money by next week, no strings attached."

There was another silence.

"And if you don't want to use it for law school, you can use it for whatever you want. You can study music, travel to the Antarctic, or stay here in the place where you were born and be satisfied. Only I don't think you will be."

Brackett picked up another book and read the title out loud. "De Tocqueville. *Democracy in America.*"

Now Robb spoke defensively, almost angrily. "It's a good place here."

"For many people, very good people, too, it is. But not for all people."

Why is he pounding me like this? Trying to influence my life? Of course he wants to close the case as quickly and as cheaply as he can. Yet I think there's more to it than that. He really means some of what he says. He means well by me. You can see it in his eyes. He bears his own sorrows, the sorrow of lost opportunity, for one.

Robb's annoyance began to fade. In its place he was feeling confusion. *You'll have the money by next week.* That meant a good many thousands of dollars, next week, instead of more money, maybe—in two, three, five years.

He stood up, saying, "I need to think. I want to walk outside by myself."

"Go ahead. I'll get some figures together while you do."

The day was bright, moist, and in full leaf the color of young

lettuce. On such a day you were supposed to feel springtime energy. You were supposed to feel indomitable. Instead, as he went out through the back door toward the chicken yard and the garden patch, his legs felt weak, as if Brackett's weariness had been contagious. He walked over to the fence and leaned upon it.

Already there was a sense of desertion about this home place. Weeds had sprouted at the base of the bean poles. The hens pecked and clucked, poor simple creatures, unaware of the changes that were coming. He thought of his mother who had fed those hens and weeded those beans. He thought of her infected teeth. He thought of the rusting gasoline pump at the farm's farthest edge and of his father's crooked posture after the stroke. He thought of the path they had trodden all their lives, from here to the little town and back, rarely any farther, and then never really far.

At college, walking under the trees, Lily and he had talked about their visions. Of course they had visions! Who did not? Lily was practical. Her mother was a widow who sewed for a living and knew the sour taste of poverty. It had taught her the prudent use of money. You sought a job and lived within its means. You had security. Who could argue with sound advice like that?

Now of a sudden his fists clenched and his heart ran fast. He was seeing himself in a new way. Perhaps he had talked himself into becoming a teacher because his parents were proud of the status. He had never been truly enthusiastic, not truly. And he saw himself as a dreary, elderly man standing before the rows of young faces, not giving them what they deserved. He had presented a false picture of himself, and it had been wrong of him. He would not be a good teacher. He wasn't qualified. He did not love it enough.

"I could be a good lawyer, though," he thought aloud. "Law is a tool. There's no limit to what you can do with it. Even make life easier, maybe, for people like my parents. It's productive, it's exciting. You'd never know what each day might bring. Oh, probably

I'm being overly romantic about it, even naive, but why not? I may be impetuous, I probably am, but if I don't try it, I'll never know. And if I don't do it now, I never will."

Brackett was spreading some printed forms out on the table. He looked up, questioning, when Robb came in. This was the moment: You stood on the diving board prepared for the high, perfect leap, felt suddenly the clutch of fear, but were ashamed to retreat.

"I'll take your offer," he said.

Brackett nodded. "A wise decision. You won't regret it. Sit down, and I'll show you. I've got your expenses figured out. If you agree with my figures, you'll sign here, and we'll be in business. All you'll have left to do is get yourself admitted to the school."

At Lily's house they were reading the law school's catalog. From the corner where she was sewing in the lamplight, Mrs. Webster asked, "Robb, has the sale gone through?"

"Yes, the farm went last Tuesday. For practically nothing, too. It was all mortgaged. I didn't know. Dad must have had to do it after he had his stroke."

No one spoke. A parting with land, the living earth, brought a sadness unlike the loss of any other wealth. And Robb knew that the memory of its trees and seasons would stay with him always.

"There's a terrible accident," he said. "A stranger walks in to talk it over, changes the direction of another man's life, and walks out. Tell me, was I suddenly crazy, or wasn't I?"

"Why Robb, you've always had this in the back of your mind, and I've always known you had it," Lily said. "You just didn't think it made any sense for you, so you didn't talk about it, that's all."

Mrs. Webster spoke sharply. When she wanted to, Mrs. Webster could be very sharp indeed. "If you want my answer, Robb, I'll give it to you. Yes, it was a crazy impulse."