

BELVA PLAIN

Homecoming

A NOVEL



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Homecoming

BOOKS BY BELVA PLAIN

HOMECOMING

SECRECY

PROMISES

THE CAROUSEL

DAYBREAK

WHISPERS

TREASURES

HARVEST

BLESSINGS

TAPESTRY

THE GOLDEN CUP

CRESCENT CITY

EDEN BURNING

RANDOM WINDS

EVERGREEN

Chapter 1

*T*he desktop was always covered with mail, incoming and outgoing. Appeals from charities, politicians, whether federal, state, or town, bills and letters from scattered friends, all came flowing. Sometimes it seemed to Annette that the whole world made connection with her here and asked for response.

She picked up the pen to finish the last of the notes. Her precise backhand script lay between wide margins, the paper was as smooth as pressed linen, and the dark blue monogram was decorative without possessing too many curlicues. The whole, even to the back of the envelope, on which her name was engraved—Mrs. Lewis Martinson Byrne, with her ad-

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dress beneath—was pleasing. E-mail might be the way these days, but there was still nothing as satisfying to send or to receive as a well-written letter; also these days, “Ms.” might be the title of choice for many, but Annette still preferred to be “Mrs.,” and that was that.

Having sealed the envelope, she placed it on top of the tidy pile of blue-and-whites, sighed, “There—that’s finished,” and stood up to stretch. At eighty-five, even though your doctor said that you were physically ten years younger, you could expect to feel stiff after sitting so long. Actually, you could expect almost anything, she thought, knowing how to laugh at herself.

Old people were amusing to the young. Once when she was less than ten years old, her mother had taken her to call on a woman who lived down the country road. It seemed, as most things did now, like yesterday.

“She’s very old, at least ninety, Annette. She was a married woman with children when Lincoln was president.”

That had meant nothing to Annette.

“My nephew took me out in his machine,” the old woman had said. “We went all the way without a horse.” Marveling, she had repeated, “Without a horse.”

That had seemed ridiculous to Annette.

"So now it's my turn," she said aloud. "And yet, inside, I don't feel any different from the way I felt when I was twenty." She laughed again. "I only look different."

There she was between the windows, framed in gilt, eternally blond and thirty years old, in a red velvet dress. Lewis had wanted to display her prominently in the living room, rather than here in the more private library. But she had objected: portraits were intimate things, not to be shown off before the world.

Facing her and framed in matching gilt on the opposite wall was Lewis himself, wearing the same expression he had worn in life, alert, friendly, and faintly curious. Often, when she was alone here, she spoke to him.

"Lewis, you would have been amused at what I saw today" (or saddened, or angry). "Lewis, what do you think about it? Do you agree?"

He had been dead ten years, yet his presence was still in the house. It was the reason, or the chief one, anyway, why she had never moved.

It had been a lively house, filled with the sounds of children, friends, and music, and it was lively still. Scouts had meetings in the converted barn, and nature-study classes were invited. Once the place had been a farm, and after that a country estate, one of the

less lavish ones in a spacious landscape some two or three hours' drive from New York. They had bought it as soon as their growing prosperity had allowed. The grounds, hill, pond, and meadow were treasures and had already been promised after Annette's death to the town, to be kept as a green park forever. That had been Lewis's idea; caring so much about plants and trees, he had built the greenhouse onto the kitchen wing; all their Christmas trees had been live, and now, when you looked beyond the meadow, you saw in a thriving grove fifty years' worth of Scotch pines and spruce.

Of course, it was all too big, but Annette loved it. Especially she loved this room. It was—what was the word for it? Cozy, perhaps? No, that was a poor word to describe it. *Cozy* meant too much stuff: too many afghans, plants, and pillows. This room's walls were covered with books: novels, biography, poetry, and history. The colors were many quiet shades of blue. Today, in winter, one dark red amaryllis flourished in an earthenware pot on the desk.

In the corner there was a large dog-bed for the two King Charles spaniels. They had always kept spaniels. Roscoe, a gangly, homely mongrel with sorrowful eyes, had a mat of his own. He was completely dependent on Annette, who had found him deserted and hungry on a Caribbean beach. And she wondered

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whether, after having lived all these years in comfort, he had any memory of his past misery. She wondered about animals. She wondered, in fact, about everything. . . . But she had better get moving with this pile of letters if they were to be picked up today.

The morning was mild, one of those calm, cold winter mornings without wind, when the pond lay still and lustrous as stainless steel. Soon, if this cold were to last, it would freeze over. Wearing a heavy jacket and followed by the dogs, she went down the drive to the mailbox at the end.

Chapter 2

“*I* didn’t say I wouldn’t go, Dad. I only said I didn’t feel like going.”

“Cynthia, I understand. Our hearts ache for you. You can’t know how much.”

Across the miles she heard his sigh and saw him seated in his wing chair, high above the Potomac, with the telephone in his hand and a view of the Jefferson Memorial before him. She knew that her parents suffered as people suffer for a bomb victim or an amputee, yet still with no true knowledge of his pain.

Gran’s note lay on her lap, written, of course, on the familiar paper that had accompanied every greet-

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ing and every birthday present going back to the year when Cynthia had learned to read.

Come Saturday whenever it's convenient for you, spend the day with me, have dinner and stay overnight. Stay as long as you like, if you've nothing you'd rather do.

Gran was wonderful, with her sweetness, humor, and old-fashioned foibles. But Cynthia was not in the mood for them. To pack an overnight bag, to sleep in a different bed, even these simple efforts were too much right now.

"Is Mother there?" she asked.

"No, she's at one of those charity teas. Your mother, the confirmed New Yorker, has made this move from the city with no trouble at all. It's taken me, the dollar-a-year man, a whole lot longer. Government is mighty different from the business world, let me tell you."

She understood that he was making conversation because he did not want to hang up the telephone, to lose that link. He wanted to have answers to questions that usually he was reluctant to ask. Now he asked.

"I hate to bring up the subject, but have you heard anything from Andrew?"

"No," she said bitterly. "Not since the last useless apology, and that's over a month ago, when I got my unlisted number. Apparently he hasn't gotten a lawyer

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yet. And my lawyer says we can't wait much longer to file for divorce."

"What the hell's delaying him?" And when she did not reply, "The bastard! And I always liked him so much."

"I know. He was likable, wasn't he? More's the pity for me."

"Tell me, are you still seeing that—doctor?"

"The shrink, you mean? No, I gave it up last week. Frankly, I find that working on meals for the homeless does as much for me, or maybe more."

"You're probably right."

Dad would think so. As a perfect exemplar of the work ethic, he disapproved of self-pity, weakness, and failure. Especially did he deplore a failed marriage. The Byrne family had never had a failed marriage. But he was always far too kind to say so. She knew that too.

"You may not think it, but this visit will do you good, Cindy. We'll take our old, brisk walk around the pond with Gran's dogs, then down to the village and back. Your mother and I really want you to go. Will you?"

"What's the occasion? It's not Gran's birthday."

"She misses us. Simple as that. If you have time, pick up a box of those chocolate macaroons that she loves, will you? Your mother's bought a silk shawl for

her, even if it's not her birthday. We'll take the shuttle early Friday. I'm afraid you'll have to rent a car. It's a pity you let Andrew keep the Jaguar."

"He's welcome to it. Who needs a car in New York? Anyway, he bought it, it was his money."

"Well. Well, all right, dear. We'll see you next Friday."

What was the use of arguing? It was easier to accede and go.

She sat there. Her limp hands lay in her lap. The fourth finger on the left one showed a band of white skin, as did the right hand where the engagement diamond had once flashed. You would think that after four months, skin would have darkened. And she kept sitting there, looking at her hands.

"They should be photographed," Andrew always said, "or even sculpted. You have classical hands."

He had thought she was beautiful. She knew very well that she was not, certainly not in any classical sense. She was only slender, with plentiful dark hair and fine, clear skin. She was well groomed. Working as she did on the editorial board of a fashion magazine, she understood how to make the best of herself.

"You startled me," he told her on that first evening. "I didn't want to go to another boring cocktail party, but it was an obligation. And there you were, the first person I saw when I entered the room. I just stopped

and stared. You were standing there in the middle of that jostling, chattering, overdressed crowd, tall and calm in your dark-blue dress. Do you remember?"

She remembered everything. Everything. As usual she had been wearing dark blue. It was her signature. Sophisticates in New York wore black, so she would wear dark blue, different, but not too different.

"You were twinkling," he always said, liking to repeat the story, "with that look you have when you are amused and too polite to let it show. It wasn't a superior look—it isn't like you to be superior—just faintly curious, as if you were wondering what the competition and all the nervous tension were about."

Curious. Grandpa Byrne had had that look.

"I love your poise," Andrew said, "the way you don't shriek out greetings with all that fake enthusiasm people have. I love the way you can sit with your hand in mine and keep silent until the very last note of the music dies."

He had the most wonderful face, a strong nose, a soft, olive complexion, and, in contrast, light eyes, green, dark lashed and pensive. Remembering was unbearable now. A metamorphosis had taken place. What had been sweet, was gall, bitter and angry. . . .

She stood up and went to the window. New York with all its splendor was merely a jumble of towers and steeples this afternoon, a forbidding stone wilder-

ness under the gloomy rain-soaked sky. If the rain had not been torrential, she would have gone outdoors and walked in it for miles, walked to exhaustion.

“What shall I do?” she asked aloud. “I am becoming a nuisance to myself and must not become a nuisance to other people. Must not.”

Turning, she looked around the room, searching there as if, among the remnants of a life destroyed, she might somehow find a signpost, an explanation, or a direction. But the fruitwood chests, Persian rugs, and paintings of the Hudson River School with their round hills and snowfields, these tasteful possessions that befit the home of a rising young banker, all these had no explanation for the wreckage. None.

She walked down the hall. It was long, thirty-one steps to the end. Or more, if you counted from the far wall of the living room. Starting at two o'clock in the morning you could easily measure off a mile before dawn, and if you were lucky, the urge to sleep might come.

Past the bedroom where now, in a sumptuous moss-green bed, she slept alone, were the two closed doors; the people who came to clean this pair of rooms were instructed to close the doors when they were finished and to keep them so. Suddenly, she needed to open them and look in. The rooms, except for color, pink