



*The Yearning Heart*

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London W1F 8AN  
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First published in 2011.  
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2018.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-2369-0

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# Chapter One

Burton Banks, East Yorkshire, Summer 1941

Fran Bewholme fled along the river bank avoiding the lane, not wanting to meet anyone, not wanting to explain. Ignoring the aching stitch in her side, she ran on, brushing past tall reeds and wild grasses, startling moorhens bedded for the night. She felt the thin material of her new blue dress flap and cling around her bare legs. The pain in her chest pulled tighter, causing her breath to come out in short, staccato pants. She gulped for air, succeeding only in taking in the humid stillness of the night.

At last she reached the back of the house. Silhouetted against the night sky, it looked eerie in the pale moonlight. She darted through the timber yard to the back door. Letting herself into the empty house, she dashed up the two flights of stairs to her attic sanctuary. She flung herself on the bed, buried her face in the pillow and only then did she allow herself to cry. Heartbroken, confused, her body heaved as she sobbed. Caught up in her unhappiness, she didn't hear the footfalls creaking on the stairs.

'Well, my lovely, what ails you?' The sarcastic voice broke into her distress.

Startled, she turned over on the bed to see Victor Renton, her sister's husband, in his army uniform. His swarthy, powerfully built physique, filling the door frame of her bedroom, swayed unsteadily. Shame coloured her tear-stained face that she should be seen in such a state.

'Where is everyone?' he demanded.

Trying to control her sobs, Fran gulped, 'At the pictures.'

'Isabel should be here,' he grunted. 'I need her.' He stumbled as he turned to go, and then changed his mind. Glancing over his shoulder, he smiled slyly at her. As if he had come to quick decision, he spun round, and in three long strides, he was by her bedside. Dropping down to her level, he put a finger under her chin and asked, 'Why the tears?'

Startled by his nearness, she remained silent.

'Go on, you can tell me,' he coaxed.

She was surprised by his attention because he usually ignored her. Was he being kind to her, treating her like a grown-up? Suddenly, she had this overwhelming urge to unburden herself, so she blurted out the sorry story.

'Charlie Moxon took me to the barrack dance and said I looked sweet in my new dress. Then Dora Parker, dressed like Betty Grable, came and dragged him onto the dance floor. They smooched in a way that Charlie never did with me and then they sneaked off.' A loud sob escaped and she hiccupped.

Victor leant closer. 'Go on,' he said. His breath, smelling of beer, wafted across her face.

She shrank back, not liking his nearness, but at least he wanted to listen to her. She gulped, bit her lip and continued. 'I found them in the bar, kissing. I shouted at him to come with me. He told me I was just a kid and too young for him. A crowd gathered,

some of them were girls from my last year at school, and they all laughed at me.' She closed her eyes, but couldn't stop the hurtful scene replaying. They made her feel such a fool. How could she stay after such a public humiliation? Hugging her arms tight around her trembling body, she thought of the tender kisses she had once shared with Charlie. 'I thought he loved me,' she whispered.

Victor's eyes narrowed, 'Frances Bewholme, what do you know about love?'

She shrugged, affronted, and not wanting to show her ignorance, adopted an exaggerated tone. 'Of course I know about love. I'm sixteen. I'm a woman.'

He laughed, hoarsely. 'And that you are, my lovely,' Lightly, he ran his hand down the smooth skin of her exposed leg. Hastily, she pulled down her rumpled dress and lowered her eyes from his gaze.

Unsteadily, he rose to his feet. 'I've got the very thing to soothe you. Back in a minute.'

She laid her head on the pillow, thankful to be alone once more, and closed her eyes. When she heard Victor returning, she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

'You're very kind,' she whispered shyly as he pressed the tall tumbler of clear liquid into her outstretched hand. Lemonade, she thought. But it didn't taste like any lemonade she had drunk before. She took a deep swallow and coughed as it burnt down her throat. It was great of her brother-in-law to treat her like a grown-up. He sat down next to her on the bed. He had taken off his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves, showing off the strength of his muscular arms. The heat of his body touched hers and she felt comforted. She sipped more of the drink, savouring the sensation of the liquid fire running down her throat and into her belly, making her feel good.

She drained her glass and giggled. 'That was nice.'

He took the empty glass from her hands and placed it on the floor. 'Now, what shall we talk about?' He slipped an arm casually about her shoulder, drawing her nearer to him. She didn't resist. Victor was unexpectedly nice, brotherly.

'How would you like a proper boyfriend, one who can show you real love?'

Her deep blue eyes widened and she giggled again, feeling so light-headed and deliciously warm and tingly, and so grown-up. 'Yes, please.'

'Let me show you.' He leant across her, one hand cupping her budding breast. This wasn't the way brothers were supposed to act, she thought, though she felt powerless to stop him.

Suddenly, his lips were crushing hers, taking her breath away. He forced her mouth open with his tongue. Surprised, she clung to him, overwhelmed by the rippling sensation cascading through her as his tongue explored her mouth. Excitement gripped her. Abruptly, without warning, he pushed her back onto the bed, pushing up her dress to reveal slender, white thighs.

'Take your dress off,' he ordered, hoarsely.

Obedying in a trance, she watched in awe as he dropped his trousers and pulled off his shirt. She gasped in amazement, stopping what she was doing. She'd never seen a man naked before. Impatiently, he forced her dress over her head and ripped off her undergarments. She was surprised that she felt no inhibitions at letting a man see her without a stitch of clothing on.

'God, you're beautiful,' he moaned, his eyes glazing over.

She felt so light-headed and dreamy as, smiling at him, she held out her arms. The next moment he was on top of her, his hot body melted into hers. At first it hurt, making her back arch, which

seemed to excite him more. But soon, she was lost in a rapturous frenzy that went on for ever and ever.

She must have drifted into sleep, for when she woke he was on top of her again, kissing her breasts, curling his tongue round her firm nipples. But this time she was sober. Fear gripped her and, panicking, she tried to push him away, but that only succeeded in rousing his passion higher.

When he was spent, he gripped her hands in a vice above her head. She felt his breath on her face, thick, rancid with tobacco and drink. 'Well, my lovely. That's proper love. You can have it anytime from me.'

Thoughts of her sister came into her mind. Shame and guilt overcame her. What had she done? As if he had read her mind, he said. 'This is our secret. You tell no one. Do you understand?'

Frightened, she whispered, 'Yes.'

His dark eyes mocked her as she struggled beneath him to free herself. 'You want it again?'

Terror seized her. What if her parents and her sister found her like this? What would they say? What would they do? He laughed callously at her stricken face.

Just then, there was the sound of a door opening and voices. She froze in horror. They were home. He clasped a rough hand across her mouth. 'Don't you forget, this is our secret. You tell no one. Understand?'

He released his hand, and, hardly daring to breathe, she nodded in reply. Noiselessly, he went from her bed and from her room. She lay rigid with shock, unable to move, unable to think. From below, she heard voices and her name mentioned, and then Victor's loud voice carried up to her.

'She's got a headache and gone to bed.'

Frightened that her mother would come up, Fran scrambled into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. She would have loved a bath, to cleanse her body in an attempt to banish all traces of his lingering smell, of sweat, tobacco, drink and . . . she couldn't bring herself to think of that.

Restless in bed, feeling sore and bruised, Fran could not sleep. Remorse set in and her mind ran wild. Dear Lord, she had committed a sin, an unforgivable sin, and with her sister's husband. What if Isabel found out, or her mother? Agnes would surely slay her, for she didn't think twice about hitting her youngest daughter. Guilt saturated every part of her body, and of her mind. And she knew that she must never tell anyone of this dreadful secret.

A few days later, Victor Renton went back to join his unit and Fran breathed a sigh of relief. She pushed him and the incident to the back of her mind and vowed it would never happen again.

For a time, except for the night sky flashes and sounds of the distant air raids on the city of Hull, life at High Bank House seemed to carry on as normal. Though they had food rationing, her mother always seemed to provide food for the table. They never went hungry. Fran had given up sugar, and didn't miss it, but she longed for a bar of chocolate.

It was about six weeks later. Fran had just rinsed her face in cold water and, raising her head, stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her face was stark white, and her blue eyes were dark in their sockets. She looked a complete mess. The ravages of the morning sickness had been with her for over a week now and she had missed her period. Her stomach retched again and she collapsed once more over the lavatory pan. Finally, she couldn't be sick any more and, wearily, she rested her head on the wooden seat, wanting nothing more than to climb back upstairs and into her

bed. But, to avoid arousing her mother's suspicions, she had to go to work as usual. She worked as a junior assistant in the office of a small seed manufacturer in Beverley and Miss Barker, her superior, would not tolerate lateness.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, Fran could hear her mother preparing breakfast. The very smell of food made her want to retch again, but she forced herself back to her bedroom. She tugged on her serviceable navy skirt, which fitted her now that she'd moved the button, though her neat blouse was tight across her swelling breasts – but her cardigan hid this fact. She let her blonde hair hang loose, Veronica Lake style, to hide her pale face and dark eyes. Treading lightly, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen, wondering if she could escape without her mother seeing her.

Agnes Bewholme stood at the range, busily stirring a pan of porridge and keeping her eye on the bacon sizzling in the pan. As Fran entered she said, 'Give your dad a shout for breakfast.'

Quickly, Fran pulled on her coat and went to call to her father. Then, she grabbed her bicycle from the shed and peddled fast down the lane. With any luck, by tonight, her mother would have forgotten that she'd left without any breakfast.

For a whole week, Fran worked at avoiding her mother. In her naivety, she thought if no one knew of her condition, it would go away, it wouldn't happen. Once she got over the early morning sickness, she felt all right for the rest of the day and was her usual self.

Her sister, Isabel, worked in a newspaper and tobacco shop in Beverley and was always up at dawn to see to the morning deliveries, so Fran never saw her in the mornings.

One morning, after a restless night's sleep, Fran missed the alarm and overslept. She sprang out of bed and instantly wished she hadn't as the nausea swept over her. Rushing down the stairs to

the bathroom, she almost collided with her mother on the landing.

‘Whoa, my girl,’ said Agnes catching hold of Fran’s arm. ‘What’s up with you?’

Fran could feel the retch in her throat and, pulling her arm free, dashed to be sick. Cold sweat wrung her body as she heaved and heaved until she could only taste the bitter bile. She rested her head on the lavatory seat, waiting until the swimming in her head stopped. But suddenly she was yanked to her feet, her body swaying unsteadily.

‘You’re pregnant!’ Her mother’s voice hissed in her ear.

Fran felt relief now that her mother knew of her condition and she would not have to bear the burden alone. ‘Oh, Mam, I’m sorry,’ she cried, falling against Agnes’s wiry frame. But she was unprepared for her mother’s aggressive outburst.

‘You bitch!’ Agnes yelled, pushing her daughter back down to the floor.

Fran banged her shoulder hard against the lavatory pan, sending a rack of pain through her body. She let out a sharp moan and caught her breath. Stunned, she looked up into Agnes’s faded green eyes, which flashed with disbelief and anger.

‘A daughter of mine expecting and not married. You slut!’ she shouted. Her mouth working in anger, Agnes raised her hand.

Instinctively, Fran pressed her body against the cold bathroom wall, but Agnes’s aim didn’t miss. Fran felt the blow to her cheekbone, which sent her head reeling, hitting it against the wall. She screamed with pain and fright. But still, her mother rained blows to her body.

As she did so, Agnes shrieked, ‘A bastard child! I won’t have it!’

Tears streamed down Fran’s cheeks as she sobbed and gulped, ‘I’m sorry, Mam, I’m sorry.’

‘You will be.’ With that, Agnes hauled Fran back up to her feet. ‘Now, miss, get yourself downstairs and see what your father has to say.’ In her confusion, Fran thought of her dear father and how much she loved him. What would he think? She stumbled downstairs with Agnes in pursuit.

In the kitchen, Will was at the sink washing his hands. He half turned as his daughter and wife burst in, saying, ‘What’s all the shouting about?’

‘You might well ask,’ Agnes said, throwing a fiery glance at him. ‘I’ll let your blue-eyed girl tell you.’ She stood with her hands on her hips, her eyes blazing at Fran. ‘Tell your father.’

Will looked from his wife to his daughter. ‘You’re crying, lass,’ he reached out to touch Fran. She wanted so much to seek the comfort of his arms, but, instead, she shrank back. Her father looked puzzled. ‘Come on, nowt can be that bad.’

Fresh sobs choked in Fran’s throat as she tried to get her words out. ‘I’m . . .’ But Agnes cut in, her voice unforgiving. ‘She’s expecting a bastard child.’

Will’s ruddy face paled, his blue eyes darkened, his voice unusually sharp. ‘What do you mean, Agnes?’ He turned on his wife.

Agnes, hands still on hips, retorted, ‘It’s plain enough. She’s unwed and pregnant.’

Slowly, Will turned to look at his youngest daughter. ‘Say it’s not true, lass.’ His eyes pleaded.

Fran felt her heart quiver with shame, her legs about to buckle. Gripping the back of a chair for support, she forced herself to meet Will’s eyes. ‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ was all she could whisper. His huge frame seemed to visibly shrink before her as he looked at her in shock. He stumbled to his chair by the fireside. Agnes, now

looking completely devastated, sat in the chair at the other side. A dreadful silence followed. Fran could smell it. It was more terrible than Agnes's fury.

*Dear God, she thought, what will they say or do when they learn who the father is?*