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The Songbird

Valerie Wood

CHAPTER ONE

'Mama!' Poppy untangled a wisp of red hair from her forehead and twirled it round her finger. 'Can I ask you something? Something secret?'

Mary Mazzini put down her mending and looked at her young daughter. 'You mean tell me something? If it's a secret?'

Poppy clasped her hands beneath her chin and swayed from side to side. 'No. I mean ask you something.'

'You can ask me anything at all.' Her mother smiled. 'You know that.'

'Yes, but this is especially special and I don't want anyone else to know. Not Pa, and especially not Tommy!'

'All right. What is it?' Mary took up her sewing again. Poppy sometimes took a long time to get to the point. She didn't like to miss anything out in case it was important.

Poppy came up closer to her mother and, breathing into her ear, asked, 'When will I be old enough to love somebody?'

Her mother pondered. Poppy constantly surprised her with a variety of questions, but this one surprised her more than most, and although she thought she knew what she meant, she answered in a vague manner and kept her eyes on her sewing. 'You love us already, don't you? Your pa and Tommy and me?'

'Oh, I don't mean us, our family,' Poppy said urgently. 'I mean somebody else! I mean somebody that I might want to marry one day.'

'I think, sweetheart, that at only ten years old, you're a little too young to consider that!' Mary gave a tender smile. What was the child thinking of? Or who was the child thinking of might be the better question.

'I know,' Poppy said earnestly. 'That's why I'm asking. When will I be old enough?'

'It's difficult to say really,' her mother replied in all seriousness, knowing that she mustn't laugh or make fun. 'It depends. It has nothing to do with how old a person is, it's a matter of meeting someone and knowing that you love him or her.'

'So could I have met somebody already? Am I old enough? Because I think I have. I do, I mean.' Poppy shook her mother's hand so that she had to put down her sewing and look at her.

'You might well be fond of someone,' her mother said gently. 'But love is a different matter and you are far too young,' she repeated, 'to even think of such a thing.' She leaned towards Poppy and kissed her cheek. 'Love is for grown-up people. Playing with toys and games is for children.'

Poppy frowned. 'Is Tommy old enough - or Charlie?' she added, as if in afterthought.

Ah, Mary thought. Charlie! He's the object of desire. Poor Charlie, how embarrassed he would be. 'Your brother is far too young, even though he thinks he's a man at fourteen, and so is Charlie. Boys don't fall in love until they're much older. Come now,' she said firmly, bringing the conversation to an end. 'Get the tablecloth out and set 'table. It's time for supper. Then go and call your pa in from the shop. He said he'd come to 'Mechanics with us tonight.'

Poppy and her mother went to the theatre or music hall nearly every Friday night. Tommy sometimes accompanied them, unless he thought there would be a lot of dancing, though he liked the singers and the comedians. If he wasn't too busy, Poppy's father, Joshua, would shut up his grocery and coffee shop in Savile Street, close by Hull's town dock, and join them until the last act when he would slip out of the theatre and hurry back, and he and Tommy would prepare coffee and put out the cakes and pastries, and open up again in time to catch the late night crowd who came streaming out of the Mechanics Music Hall, the Theatre Royal or the Assembly Rooms, which were all close by.

Then, as the crowds wended their way home, the performers arrived at the coffee shop: the singers, dancers, jugglers and comics, who, though tired and bereft of wigs and make-up, were not quite ready to fall into their rented beds, but needed to unwind and chat, which they could do at Joshua Mazzini's, for he was never in a hurry to close or go to his own bed. He was of Italian extraction and would have talked all night to anyone prepared to listen. They had all heard the story of his penniless grandfather, who had arrived in London from Italy looking for work, and was loaned a wooden cart by a fellow Italian, and advised to head north.

'There isa no worka here,' Joshua would mimic affectionately. 'That's what he was told. And so he walked. All 'way from London,' he would add in his own Hull dialect. 'All 'way to Hull, pushing his cart with his worldly belongings in it, and he finished up here.' He would look proudly round his shop, which on one side was shelved with groceries, with packets of this and

that, sacks of flour, tins of biscuits, slabs of cheese and butter, while on the other side small tables were spread with checked cloths and a posy of flowers in the centre, with chairs with matching cushions, for, he said, folks will stay longer if they're comfortable. The coffee pot was constantly bubbling and spitting and there were always warm pastries, chocolate cake and sweet biscuits, for his wife, Mary, was an excellent baker. Joshua would open the shop door and the aroma would drift out, bringing the customers in.

Joshua advertised the local entertainment by putting posters in his window or on the shop counter, and for this he received two free tickets for a Monday, when the audience was sparse, and two for a Friday. Poppy, when she was allowed, would go to both performances, for she was entranced by the colour, the music, the dancing girls, the singers and the sheer magic of the theatre or music hall. She watched avidly as the dancers went through their routines, she memorized the songs, and when she came home she would put on her mother's shoes, drape a shawl round her shoulders and perform in front of the mirror in her attic bedroom above the shop.