

## CHAPTER TWO

“Can I walk with you, Eileen? May I keep you company?” The request was so unexpected that she stopped and stared disbelievingly at the speaker. She was a plain girl. She knew that. She was not a girl to whom the boys were attracted. She knew that too, though she did not for one moment regret the lack of attention. She went to school to work, to achieve good results, to pass exams, to succeed and live up to her parents' expectation. They never tired of telling her how important it was to improve her education, to take advantage of the chance that she had. She was reminded of the sacrifices they had made and continued to make on her behalf in order for her to have the chances they never had. It was heresy for her to as much as think about a boy leave alone talk to one, or even be addressed by one! In a sense she was grateful that she was plain and unattractive and she took great care never to do anything that threatened to change this image that had been bestowed upon her.

“You want help with your homework?” she asked haughtily.

“No, no!” he said laughing. “I would just like to walk home with you.”

“You have no idea where I live. Anyway, boys don't walk home with me.”

“Well, that's where you are wrong. I know exactly where you live.”

“Surely you would prefer to be with the likes of Mavis Spencer or Stephanie Hiller?” she said, becoming concerned. “I don't think it will be very good for your image to be seen with me.”

“Mavis Spencer and Stephanie? I couldn't get near them if I tried to, not that I want to. They attract boys like bees to a honey pot, my mother says.”

“And I do not? So that's why you are asking me? There's no competition for poor little Eileen so you think you will ask her? Don't worry, I am not offended, but the answer is a plain “no”.”

“Oh, come on Eileen. It's no big deal. I am only asking to walk home with you.” He stood, arms stretched between the two brick piers to one of the gateways from the playground and blocked her path.

“I can always go out the other exit,” she said. Clearly he had been waiting for her to come out of school, but why her? Why not someone else; someone who was more attractive and more likely to be amenable to his approach?

“You could try,” he said as she tried to duck under his arms. “That is not the reason, what you said. I would simply like to walk you home and talk. There's no harm in that is there?”

“I suppose I cannot stop you walking along the same pavement as me,” she said. “If you will let me pass. But don't expect me to help you with your homework. Which is it, French? I heard some of the girls say they thought today's is rather difficult.”

No, really. It's not French. If anything I am having difficulties with one of the Applied Maths questions.”

“I thought so!” she said angrily and started to walk quite swiftly in the direction of the park.

“But I will work it out for myself, if it takes me all night,” he said from behind her. “Would you think any better of me if I did work it all out? Not that I am all that bright. Not like you, Eileen.”

She did not respond but walked quickly past the forbidding iron railings and down a long road. She could see the park gates at the end. She could hear him padding along behind her, dogging her steps but saying nothing, silent but faithful. “What are you doing tonight?” he asked after they had gone well over a hundred yards and she was beginning to wonder if he had just taken a vow of silence in deference to her attitude.

“What am I doing tonight?” she asked. “What is that to you?”

“I just wondered. I mean will you be going out?”

“Going out? Going out where? I never go out.”

“Watching television?”

“I never watch television.”

“What will you do then?”

“I’ll be studying, I suppose,” she said sharply.

“Studying? Don’t you ever go out?”

“Why would I want to go out? I cannot dance, the cinema gives me a headache, and boys just bore me!”

“There’s a good film on at the Odeon,” he said, catching up at her side. “About smuggling drugs and spies in Vienna. Would you like to go?”

“My parents would never consent. And I’ve told you that going to the cinema gives me a headache.”

“I would pay for you!” he said brightly.

“They would still not permit it. And it isn’t finding the money that affects me.”

“You could say you were going back to the school for an evening activity.”

“What, lie to my mother and father?” Eileen said firmly. “That would be deceitful. It is not a nice thing to suggest. Please talk about something else or not at all.”

He fell behind at this rebuff but he followed her into the park, through the wide entrance where the ornate iron gates creaked every morning and evening on their rusting hinges, down the flower lines slope to the edge of the lake and around towards the bandstand. On the steps, surrounded by about half a dozen youths, sat two girls. One of the youths called out to him as they approached.

“There you are,” said Eileen. “Why don’t you go and join them?”

“Because I’ve said that I would rather walk with you.”

“They are your friends, though, aren’t they?” she said accusingly. “I have seen you with them from time to time.”

“My mother does not like me hanging about with them. She says that Dave Henry is heading for trouble. Oh, you won’t tell him that I said that, will you?”

“I won’t tell him anything. I won’t even speak to him. They frighten me.”

“Frighten you?” he said anxiously. “How? What do they do? Tell me and I’ll soon put a stop to it.”

“No, no,” she said, now feeling slightly embarrassed. “It’s nothing like that. It’s more their attitude, their presence, and some of the things they say.”

“Come on, Owen,” shouted one of the youths. “Come and join us.”

“Yeah,” called one of the girls. “I don’t know why your bothering with her. She wouldn’t open her legs to have a pee!”

“You see?” demanded Eileen.

“Mavis Spencer is a bit coarse,” he said cautiously. “But I must say you wouldn’t catch Stephanie Hiller saying anything like that.”

“So you say,” said Eileen darkly. “But does she realise what hanging about with them has done to her reputation?”

“I suppose she does, if she’s got a reputation to keep,” he joked.

“The same applies to you. That’s one reason why your mother says she doesn’t want you hanging about with them.”

“Do I have a bad reputation, then?” he laughed.

“If you had you wouldn’t be walking along with me, I can assure you. But you will have if you mix with that lot. And those two girls in particular.”

“What? Mavis and Stephanie?”

“Yes! Mavis and Stephanie,” she hissed. “They already have a dreadful reputation. It is said they ask for money. Some say even from the teachers! They are bound to end up getting expelled. Look at them now! They scare me too, those two.”

“Well, I can’t see how either of them could possibly ever harm you,” he said, seemingly amused by her concern. “I suppose you are probably right about Mavis but she takes after her mother. But not Stephanie. She is about the sweetest girl anyone would ever want to meet.”

“And obliging?”

“She may be that as well. I cannot say.”

“Really?”

He ignored the sarcastic tone in her voice. "She is," he insisted. "She is streets above Mavis Spencer. In fact I wish she wouldn't hang out with them, but she won't listen."

"Oh, so you've tried talking to her?"

"No," he said sheepishly. "I haven't. But I don't think she'd listen."

Eileen did not reply but walked on a little more briskly, forcing Owen to break into a trot to catch up with her again. They reached the end of her road in silence where she stopped and turned to face him. "You have better not go any further otherwise my parents might see you and that would cause trouble."

"Your parents would object to me?"

"They would object to any boy that followed me home."

"Can I walk home with you tomorrow?"

"I'll see," she said, pulling a face.

"And the cinema?"

"Definitely not!" she said and walked away.

It came as no surprise to her to find him waiting for her at the school entrance the following afternoon when she came out to go home. A few mornings later he was standing at the end of her road when she came to walk to school. "This will have to stop," she declared. "My parents will find out that I'm seeing you."

"You're not seeing me," he protested. "This isn't seeing someone. This is no different to us sitting together on the bus, or something like that."

"As far as my parents are concerned, this is as good as seeing you. Believe me. And they will find out. Either they will see us together or someone else will and tell them. And then I will be forbidden to talk to you, and I don't want that to happen."

"But that's so unfair! We aren't doing anything wrong! All I am doing is walking alongside you. After all, they cannot stop me doing that. It's a free world."

She did not answer but walked on to school in silence with him following a few paces behind. That afternoon he was not waiting for her at the entrance and she walked home alone, feeling disappointed. She scanned the group loitering on the steps of the bandstand but he was not amongst them. "Can't you keep a boyfriend then?" Mavis Spencer called out. "I could show you how! Come over here and we'll give you a lesson!" Eileen heard them laugh, but she walked on. The next day, however, she choose a different route to walk home, one that did not take her past the bandstand.

Nearly a week passed before she once again found him standing at the school entrance. She thought of simply walking straight past him but she stopped and smiled. "Hello," she said. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"Can I walk home with you? As far as the end of your road?" he asked.

"As long as we walk through the park," she replied.

"Who was that boy who walked home with you?" asked Mrs Norris as she closed the door firmly behind her daughter. "I do not recognise him. Is he from your school? He's not one of that dreadful gang that hang around in the park, is he, Eileen?"

"No, Mother," she said, feeling subdued and guilty.

"But he is from your school?"

"He's in my year," said Eileen, biting her lip. "He only wanted some help with his Maths homework."

"Mathematics, Eileen," scolded her mother. "How many times have I told you not to contract words? It is slovenly and created a very bad impression." She rubbed away at the invisible grains of dust on a decorative vase which stood on a small table in the hall and adjusted the dried flowers. "What is his name?" she demanded as Eileen was about to go up and escape to her room. "Your father and I like to know exactly who you are seeing or mixing with."

"His name is Owen Cross," said Eileen, her heart beating. "And I am not seeing him."

"What does his father do for a living? I trust it is respectable?"

"I think his father is dead."

“What, during the War?”

“I think he died before the War. It was something to do with an accident. I really do not know. I do not know him that well.”

“I suppose his mother's in receipt of a widow's pension of some kind. Where do they live?”

“I don't know.”

“Eileen!” reprimanded her mother.

“Oh, Mother!” she cried. “I must try and start my homework before dinner. I have so much to do this evening!”

“Very well,” said her mother, running the duster up the banisters. “But your father will hear about this when he gets home, mark my words.”

“Yes Mother,” whispered Eileen. In her bedroom she flung her satchel onto the bed and watched helplessly as it bounced and fell heavily onto the floor. “Eileen?” she heard her mother call. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, Mother,” she called down. “Something fell off my bed, that's all.”

“I thought you were going to do your homework?”

“I am,” said Eileen weakly. “I am going to start it right away.”

“Well, do it quietly.”

“Do it quietly,” Eileen repeated to herself and closed the bedroom door. She decided she would not cry. She was not given to weeping easily but she felt so angry, angry not just with Owen for following her all the way to the gate or with herself for allowing this to happen, not just angry with her mother, but angry with herself for having been untruthful. Owen had not sought any assistance with his homework that evening. Nor had she a large amount to do. She just had to have some excuse to escape the interrogation. She knew it would continue that evening, possibly over dinner, possibly after. She was not given to telling lies, either.

“I don't understand my parents attitude,” she confided to Owen. “It is as if they simply do not trust me. It is not as if I am like that Mavis Spencer or Stephanie Hiller. It is not as if I have any intention to be like either of them. I have not, just in case you have any ideas about it.”

“I haven't,” said Owen. He might well have wished that she looked more like Stephanie but he did not say so. “Are you sure it is not just me? Perhaps if I came round to meet your parents?”

“Oh, no! That would never do. It is bad enough me being grilled day and night. If you had to face even half an hour of their cross-examination you would probably never want to see me again. No, it is not you. They do not know you or who you are.”

“There's not much to know.”

“That would not make matters any better. I might be able to impress them if I told them your father was a banker or a brain surgeon.”

“Why don't you, then?”

“I cannot do that! Anyway, I have already told them the truth; that your father is dead. I am not given to telling fibs. Are you?”

“No.”

“Even if you were,” she said haughtily. “I trust you would be truthful with me.”

“I will always be truthful with you Eileen,” he said.

Dinner had been eaten in stony, brooding, silence that particular evening. It was clear that her mother had told her father the awful news the moment he arrived home. It was plain there had been a crisis in the dining room before she came down and that the news was not well received. She did not expect it to be. Other parents might have asked their daughter whether the boy was nice and suggest that she might invite him around to tea. Not hers. She half waited to be asked to confirm he was not suffering from leprosy. She hoped that she might seek refuge in the kitchen as her father was never eager to set foot out there, but her father suddenly pounced and cornered her with his words. “This young man your mother has been telling me about. What does his father do for a living?”

She felt herself colour. “He has no father,” she said, her eyes lowered. “I told Mother

that when I came home.”

“That is enough of that, Eileen,” her father said sharply. “We do not want that kind of talk here. You understand?”

“Yes, Father,” she said submissively.

“You mean that he is illegitimate?”

“No! I mean nothing of the kind. His father died when he was still very young.”

“During the War, I suppose?”

“No,” she said, trying to remain calm yet feeling anger and frustration rising within her. “It was before the War. He was injured in some kind of industrial accident and died as a result, I believe.”

“What was his occupation?”

“I do not know. I have not asked Owen about his father or his mother.”

“Well you should do. You need to know what kind of people you are getting involved with.”

“I am not getting involved with him!” she protested.

“I trust that us the case, Eileen, but one thing can lead to another, and we want only the best for you. Has he any other family?”

“I think he did mention he has a sister who lives in North Wales.”

“I see. She is older than he?”

“I think she is a couple of years younger,” said Eileen. “I am not sure. I have not tried to find out about his family.”

“That is obvious, but it is the first thing you should do. I do find it rather odd that he should have a younger sister living separately in North Wales. Doubly strange. Why does she not live here with him? Did his mother marry again? And is he Welsh? You know how we feel about the Welsh.”

Eileen shook her head. The clock in the hall struck nine o'clock. “My homework,” she said.

“We must deal with this first,” said her father sternly. “I will not take long. You were telling me about his sister.”

“I hardly know anything about her. I think she was evacuated to North Wales to live with relatives during the War and that she stayed there afterwards.”

“So he is Welsh!” her father said with some disdain.

“No!” Eileen cried. “He was born at Dover.”

“Dover?” said her father with equal disgust, as if the town might have been situated in Wales.

“But that's hardly his fault. His mother works at the Newington Convalescence home.”

“In Addington Drive? What does she do? Is she a doctor or a nurse?”

“I do not know,” she said wearily. “I think she is someone quite important there. I have not asked him. I hardly know him.”

“On the contrary, young lady. You seem to know an awful lot about this boy that you say you hardly know.”

“He has been in the same year as me for the last three years,” she protested.

“I knew this kind thing would happen once they started breaking down the segregation between boys and girls. I have half a mind to write to the County Education department and complain. Has he asked you to go out with him?”

“No.”

“Has he, Eileen?”

“Well, yes. He did ask something of the kind,” she said reluctantly, “but I refused.”

“I thought as much,” said her father. “I knew this would be the case the moment you mother told me this evening. Eileen, you know how much we disapprove of any involvement with boys. It will distract from your schoolwork and your academic success. You will have plenty of time later to meet a nice young man, possibly when you go to University. After all, your going to University is the only reason why we are staying here rather than going to join my brother. I want you to promise now that you will not see him again.”

Eileen looked down at the polished surface of the dining table. "I cannot help but see him. He goes to the same school as me. He is in the same year."

"I do not care. You are not to see this young man again. You are not to encourage him in any way. Plainly this is what you have done in the past. You must tell him so, and if he continues to pester you I will come and see the Head Master. Do you understand?"

It was easier to say "yes" rather than continue to protest against the unreasonableness of the demand or the suggestion that she had been in some way guilty. Back in her bedroom she sat on the bed and sulked. "It is not fair," she told herself repeatedly. How could she avoid meeting Owen if he confronted her in the playground or waited for her after school? She would appear absolutely ridiculous if she told him what her father had said. It would be around the school in minutes and she would be a laughing stock! She simply could not tell Owen. And, she had to admit to her innermost self, she had no wish to tell him such a thing. There was more, though. There was something else that she ought to tell him and would have to tell him if he became really serious. But she did not want to tell him that either.

That night, and on many successive nights, Eileen dreamed about Owen. It was not that she encouraged him into her dreams or sought for him to be there. She did not lie in bed and think of him, slipping into slumber with his name on her lips. Nor did she welcome his presence there, but she knew of no way in which she could stop him visiting her in this way. It would have been silly to go up to him in the street and ask him to keep out her dreams. It would also have been an admission that he had, unknowingly, gained access there. It was not long before she expected to find him waiting for her when she closed her eyes and even in those dreams where she did not see him, she knew he was there; she could feel his presence.

These were her pleasant dreams, blissful nights of sweetness and light, milk and honey. But there were others where she would awake mortified by having lost him in some way. Sometimes he simply left her. Other times he perished in bizarre accidents, but most frequent were the devastating nights when she lost him because he was enticed away by another, as yet unidentified, girl.

In parallel with, and as if to feed, these dreams, and contrary to her parents wishes, Eileen started seeing Owen more often. She started seeing him in their lunch hours. She elected for a more meandering way home. Driven by her dreams she found herself feeling increasingly possessive and protective towards him. It was not long before she could no longer tell whether it was her day that ran her dreams, or her dreams that determined her life. There was a symbiotic relationship between the two but she took great care never to communicate this to Owen nor to her parents. She was sure that they knew that she was seeing him more and more and the thought of the inevitable censorship added to her insecurity and provoked even more extreme dreams. Yet she could not tell him. And he, in his part, was content to profit from the gradual change in her attitude and habits rather than question the reasons behind them.

"I know I've mentioned it before, but do feel really sorry for her," Owen said one late summer afternoon as they were walking through the park and approaching the bandstand.

"Who?" said Eileen with feelings of dread and suspicion.

"Her. Stephanie Hiller. Just look at her. She has a lovely face and a smashing figure. Someone should take her in hand; take her on one side and put her straight. Before she goes too far and gets herself in real trouble. I am surprised that her mother doesn't do something."

"Stephanie Hiller!" said Eileen bitterly. "Thank you, Owen. Thank you very much!"

"What? What have I said that's wrong?"

"You are telling me what a lovely face and figure she has! That is not the kind of thing a boy says to his girlfriend. It is not the sort of thing at all."

"Girlfriend?"

"Ex-girlfriend!"

"Oh, Eileen. You have no need to feel like that."

"Haven't I? How would you feel if all I did was extol the virtues of Dave Henry?"

"He hasn't got any virtues."

"Nor has Stephanie Hiller. She is no more than a slut."

"Oh, no, Eileen. You can't say that. Look at her. She has quality. She has such good

looks. It would seem such a waste if no-one at all talks to her, puts her straight.”

“I would have thought that talking to her would have been the waste, a complete waste of time,” she said angrily. “Yes, just look at her!” Stephanie was sat on the steps, her skirt pulled back revealing a vast expanse of thigh. “She is completely immoral,” Eileen continued with distaste. “You should hear some of the tales I have heard about her. You should hear what the other girls have to say about her. She is perverse. She is just a slut.”

“Now that is something I will not accept. If you talked to her you would find that she is a very pleasant girl and quite clever,” said Owen softly.

“Me talk to her? There's no chance of that ever happening. My parents would probably chuck me out if they found out I had talked to Stephanie Hiller. I face enough trouble over talking to you.”

“Well, someone ought to talk to her. And she such a good-looking girl as well.”

“There you go again! Thank you, Owen,” she said, biting her lip. He had never described her as “good-looking”, or “pleasant”, or even “clever” although she knew she certainly was the last. She would have liked to heard him describe her as all three. After all beauty was in the eye of the beholder and she was not going to demand that he should be absolutely truthful in such matters. Least of all was she prepared to agree with him that Stephanie Hiller possessed all these qualities even if it might be true. If Owen was to say this of anyone it should be of her.

Later that afternoon, before her father came home and whilst her mother was in the kitchen she sat at the dressing table in her parents' bedroom and contemplated her image. What would mascara, eye shade and lipstick do for her other than confirm all of her parents' worst fears? And there was no guarantee that even if she did experiment slyly Owen would think any the more of her and any the less of Stephanie Hiller. Well, he could have her, could her not? He probably had no idea what he might be getting if he did!

“She needs proper guidance and advice,” Owen continued, “before it is too late.”

“It is far too late for that,” said Eileen bitterly. “What sensible man could possibly want her now?”

“You don't appear to understand, Eileen,” he said, looking at her with astonishment. “Every man does want her. For as long as she continues to posses those looks and that figure every man will want her. That is her problem. The other girl, Mavis, you could call a slut. She is one and always will be, if that's the way you want to describe her. But Stephanie is quite different. She has personality. There's an atmosphere around her. She has an appeal that most other girls lack.”

“Including me!” snapped Eileen. “I would have thought it something few girls would want.”

“You? You are quite different.”

“Of course I am. If I were like her I would drown myself.”

“No you wouldn't, but what I am trying to say is that I see you in a completely different way. I am not interested in Stephanie in that way. I have never asked to walk home with her from school.”

“I thought you said you could never get near her!”

“I am trying to say that she is a candle to which all the moths will fly and have their wings singed for just as long as her flame burns. But much as they might be attracted by it, most moths need other moths more than they need candles.”

“Very poetic, Owen. What kind of moth are you?” He stopped and stared at Stephanie who had turned her gaze on the two of them, making Eileen feel uncomfortable.

“What am I? I am a moth who sees the flame and is aware of the danger; a moth who would prefer life with another moth.”

“Well I do not see myself as a member of the Lepidoptera but tell me, Owen, have you had your wings burnt?”

“No,” he said reflectively.

Eileen found herself dwelling on his answer. The incident was ample fuel for her nightmares and frustration dreams. She yearned so much to ask him exactly what he meant

yet regretted being so provocative as to ask the question that provoked the answer in the first place. If she asked another she might like what she heard even less. Yet she thought he had once been part of the gang that flocked around Mavis Spencer and Stephanie Hiller. She was sure that she had seen him some afternoons at the bandstand. If only she had paid more attention but then he was just another boy to be avoided. Did he really mean that he had stayed aloof from all that went on?

In some ways she was able to distil some comfort from the thought this might be so. Perhaps he was not like them after all. "He is a boy," her mother said sternly.

"So was father when you met him," she protested.

"That was different," said her mother, but refused to explain how.

In other ways she found her assumptions disturbing. If he had not yet sampled the golden fruit and discovered it for what it was, he could still fall victim to that precocious, immoral, abominable Miss Hiller who was prepared to distribute her wares so liberally. Especially as he appeared to be obsessed with her and never appeared to not be talking about her! Then, if he was like the Henry gang it seemed inevitable that sooner or later he would expect more of her than she was prepared to give. He had not so far sought even as much as a kiss but she was in no doubt that even if she went all the way she could not begin to compete with Stephanie Hiller's largesse. If that really was the case, she told herself, there was little point in even going a little of the way. She would play her limited hand coolly and at a measured pace.

"If you don't go out in the evenings," Owen asked, having grown tired of trying to entice her to the cinema, "what do you do?"

"Work," she said reluctantly. It was not the kind of image that she wanted any more to display to him. "School work," she added in case he started to think she worked in a coffee shop.

"I don't know how you stick at it," he said. "I would rather do something with my hands, woodwork or something like that."

"I do go to dancing lessons," she ventured.

"Dancing lessons?"

"Oh not modern dance, jive, jitterbug and that sort of thing. It's traditional ball room dancing. You know, waltzes, fox-trots, quicksteps and that sort of thing."

"Quick, quick, slow, slow?"

"That's right. Do you dance?"

"I don't think so," he said doubtfully. "Which evening is this?"

"It is not in the evening. It's on Saturday afternoons. It's taken by Celia Spansome at the Waveney Dance studios. Surely you have heard of her? And I normally go alone. Why don't you join? I could help you learn."

She could see in his face that she had overstepped the mark. It was not in his image to learn ballroom dancing. It was not the kind of thing one would find Dave Henry or any of his crowd doing. It was not the kind of thing that Owen would want to do. She might just as well have told him she was learning to play the oboe or the violin. "I am sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"I was wondering about the cost. Is it very expensive?"

"Oh, no," she said, brightening. "And I do need a male partner. I can't be expected to dance with girls all the time. You simply forget whether you are supposed to be leading or being led."

"Can I meet you outside, then? I could see about joining; at least I could give it a try."

She had different dreams that night. It was not Mavis and Stephanie who occupied the bandstand. Instead it was Eileen Norris in Owen's arms, transformed, gliding across the floor, a Rogers to his Astaire, with the Henry gang standing out there in the rain looking on with stupefaction. It was bliss! However, Owen did not live up to her expectations the following Saturday when he presented himself at the Dance studio. Her heart leapt when she saw him in the doorway, talking to the proprietress and pointing towards her. She felt as if she might faint when he clumsily took hold of her for the first time. And she forgave every wrong step he

made, no matter where his large, awkward, uncontrollable feet landed. "I am not cut out for this sort of thing," he whispered.

"You will learn," she said, confidently and brightly. "You will, you'll see!"

It was safe, was it not? The two of them together, in each others' arms so as to speak, yet in public, in full open view. How could her parents possibly object to that? "Did you enjoy it?" she asked him when the hour had passed.

"I don't know. It was different and it was great being here with you. For that reason if for no other, I enjoyed it."

"And you'll come next Saturday?"

"If you will, I will."

It was not long before her parents learned that Owen was taking dancing lessons. "Eileen," said her mother in her special tone that she reserved for such occasions. "Miss Spansome tells me that you have a new dancing partner."

"Yes," she said cautiously.

"I hear that it is that boy who followed you home, the boy who we expressly told you that you are not to see, the boy who, nevertheless, you have been seeing against our wishes."

"Owen decided he wanted to learn to dance."

"Owen decided," repeated her mother. "Owen decided. All by himself? I do not suppose that you did not have a hand in it and put him up to it? Lead him on?"

"No," said Eileen, sullenly. "I did mention, I think, that I went to dancing lessons on Saturday afternoons, but nothing more than that. I don't want to encourage him."

"Contractions, Eileen! I do not know what has come over you. It is the influence of this boy. You will have to stop seeing him."

"But I go to the same school as he does, and I can hardly stop him taking dancing lessons if he wants to."

"Maybe you cannot, but there may be one or two things about it that we can do. I will speak to your father as soon as he comes home. Then we shall see what we shall see."

It was going to be one of those evenings. Nothing was said during dinner and Eileen tried to sneak up to her room as soon as it was over but her father caught her as she went up the stairs. "I want to talk to you, young lady," he said brusquely.

"I will be in the kitchen," her mother announced, glaring at her.

"What is this I hear about you and this young man, Eileen? You know we told you that you were not to continue seeing him. I hear that he is also your partner at the dancing school. You did not tell us about that. How long has this been going on?"

"Only a couple of weeks, maybe three. But I cannot stop him wanting to take lessons and I do not allocate the partners."

"That could be changed," said her father. "I could speak to Miss Spansome. However I do not think that would necessarily be a satisfactory solution. I have discussed this with your mother and we think the only option open to us is to withdraw you from the school."

"What? The Dancing school?"

"Yes, Eileen. We think you have probably had enough lessons and done enough dancing. I think the time has come for you to stay at homes on Saturday afternoons and help your mother with what ever it is she does."

"That's not fair," said Eileen sullenly. "Why should I be punished?"

"Why? We told you to stop seeing this boy. You only had to tell him plainly to his face that you are not interested in him, which you are not, are you?"

"I don't know," she said in a low voice.

"I see," said her father. "So things are worse than I would have hoped. This is exactly what your mother and I were afraid of. I do not know how you can be so ungrateful after the sacrifices we have made for your education. I would remind you, young lady, that we would not be here were it not for that. Have you told him that?"

"No," she said softly.

"Then had you not better tell him before he starts getting ideas above his station?"

"I suppose so," she whispered.

“So you will tell him and you will say that you cannot continue to see him because there is no point. That is what you will do. That is what you must say. Is that clear, Eileen? I want no more shilly-shallying about. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said.

Even as she said it she knew she would not obey her father's instructions, not yet at least. They could stop her from going to her dancing lessons and meeting with Owen in that way, but she could still continue to see him in and after school. They could, she supposed, consider moving her to a different school but she knew there could be difficulties in that. There was little choice locally other than private schools and Eileen was confident her parents would not want the expense. And even if they did send her to a local private school she could still continue to see Owen. They would find some way to meet. She supposed that they could seek to move altogether. That would be a rather costly and drastic step, all over one boy. It would not fit in with their plans. And if they did appear to be thinking about such a step she would simply declare that she would find another boy friend and that she would go out of her way to ensure he was less acceptable to them than Owen was. Yes, she would scupper any plans they might have in that direction. She would have her way in this one thing. She was determined, and she felt quite smug as she lay on her bed later that evening.

It would not have been true to say, as they later did, that she did all this without any regard to the future or their plans. She did think about the future as she lay there, but she could not see clearly where it was leading. There was a blank, indistinct, wall before her, shrouded in mist. She did not want to consider whether her relationship with Owen was, or would become, serious. She was content just to have someone she could think of as a boyfriend. It did not matter if he was unsuitable as a potential husband, because that was how her parents viewed him. It did not matter that there might be no future in it even if he was considered suitable. He was someone to walk alongside her, someone to add credibility to her status at school. And the more he talked about Stephanie Hiller, the more Eileen was determined to cling close to him.