

Checkmate



Gladys Hobson

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My thanks to friends, relatives and critics.

I am forever in their debt.

Checkmate is the third part of a trilogy.

Book one – Awakening Love

Book two – Seduction by Design

A list of the significant characters and their relationships
can be found at the back of the book.

Prologue

June felt Rob's hand moving up her thigh.

'No more?' he asked her mockingly.

She could not stop her body trembling in anticipation of what she knew was about to happen. Oh, why be here alone with a man who bewitched her, knowing the impossibility of resisting his advances?

Her mind swiftly returned to early that morning: standing with Adam and Eva as they waved their daddy off to work, and then turning back inside the house that felt so empty without Charlie. It must have been less than two hours later that he rang to say he would be late home.

She hadn't been alone with Rob since that dreadful night she had broken off her engagement to him. The night when — no, don't think about it, never think about it.

And now Rob was again working his magic, with her utterly powerless to stop him. She wanted him — no, needed him. It was going on and on, her body on fire with erotic sensations. Oh... the agony of trying to resist such unspeakable ecstasy.

Then don't resist. Give in, give in. Yes, yes, oh yes ...

Her mind became lost in a whirl of hedonistic delight....

PART ONE

Chapter one

Summer 1974

Captain Charles Rogers RN retired, Consultant and Project Manager of an exciting submersible enterprise, sat at his desk with a pile of correspondence in front of him waiting to be read. But with his wife uppermost in his thoughts, how could he possibly concentrate? In his mind he saw June's smiling face as she waved him off to work that morning, young Eva in her arms and little Adam by her side. She had turned herself into the perfect wife and mother, desiring only to be there for him and the children, their own and those of her former marriage to his dead brother. Living in a beautiful home in an idyllic Lakeland setting, complete with the family he'd always wanted and a challenging job he enjoyed, life for him could not be richer. But what of June's happiness?

June was not fully alive. How could she be? Starved of the stimulation provided by an exciting career within the world of fashion, her creative spontaneity and her lively zest for life had dulled. Her genius for originality of design had forsaken her, and only that morning she had spoken of giving up both her freelance designing and her painting.

‘And do what?’ he’d asked her. ‘That is, apart from what you already do for me and the children?’

‘Open that boutique I once planned.’

But he knew it would never happen. Without Robert Watson being an irritant to produce the pearl, she quickly lost interest in every project requiring confidence and determination.

He mulled over in his mind how June had broken her engagement to Watson — short though it may have been — to marry him and bear his children. She had also forfeited an extraordinary career as a top designer and executive in Watson’s clothing interests. By her willing acceptance never to be alone with Robert and see him only on appointed days, June was cut off from someone who, through his powerful magnetism, inspired her creativity and developed her gifts in amazing ways. The problem was, Watson’s potent sexual charisma had the power to draw June like a moth to a flame!

They were expecting a visit from Robert Watson that afternoon. He was convinced she was worried that he would reject her designs; it was her constant fear. Attempts to further her freelance designing elsewhere had failed miserably. It seemed that nothing she attempted these days came up to scratch. Anxiety affected her work and now growing depression affected the whole of her life. Feeling a failure, she had no desire to mix socially. She was sleeping badly too. Her doctor had advised a course of Valium. Knowing the unwelcome effects from taking ‘mother’s little helper’ soon after the birth of her third child, she would not even consider going down that road again.

‘Can pills inspire me? No, Charlie, I might as well be half alive as half dead.’

He came to the conclusion that she was paying too high a price for his own happiness. Life with Robert Watson

as part of their relationship might have had its fraught moments, but, at least, June had been vibrantly alive.

It was time for his wife to regain her *joie de vivre*. There was only one thing he could do: allow her and Watson a little private space and let nature take over, wherever it might lead. He picked up the phone and rang his home number.

‘Hello? June Rogers speaking.’

‘Hi, it’s me. I won’t be home until after six. There’s work I have to get finished.’

‘After six?’

‘Yes, after six. It won’t be a problem. will it?’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘Charlie, have you forgotten Rob’s coming?’

‘No, I haven’t forgotten,’ he assured her casually. ‘You don’t need me there, do you?’

He could almost hear her struggling with her emotions.

‘I guess not,’ she eventually agreed.

‘That’s okay then.’

‘Are you sure, Charlie?’

‘I’m sure, June. Yes, I’m quite sure. Start to live again. That’s what we both want, isn’t it?’ He waited a moment but she didn’t answer. ‘If he asks you to work with him as before, I’ll support you every bit of the way. Things are much different now. We can work it out with the children, and with us.’

‘But, Charlie—’

‘Don’t worry, darling, you’ll be all right with Watson. The sun is shining, so why not have your meeting on the terrace?’

‘I suppose we could.’

‘I have to go now. I’ll see you this evening.’

He put down the phone and sighed: although deeply in love with his wife, he wasn't blind to her faults. He tried to fight off his strong foreboding, but images of Watson and June erotically entwined kept popping into his mind. He poured himself a coffee from the machine, sat down and picked up a report to read. His vision was too blurred to see the words. He wiped the wetness from his eyes with the back of his hand and swallowed hard. Disgusted with himself, he thumped his desk in agony of spirit.

A knock at his door, followed by the entry of an assistant who wanted to discuss the latest mini-submarine development quickly cleared his mind, bringing him back to the job in hand.

Chapter two

Rob found her, as June's domestic said he would, under the overhanging trees of the natural woodland that grew by the side of the lake. He had followed a long path, threading his way over the extensive lawn and through the sweet-scented flower gardens and colourful shrubbery, until he arrived at the deciduous trees. The beech, oak, ash and chestnut were resplendent in their summer glory. The grassy slope by the water's edge appeared a very private place, some distance from the house. Sitting silently on a rug with a pencil in her hand and a sketchpad on her knee, her gaze appeared unfocussed and her mind far away.

June appeared to be in another world, and he wondered if he might be there with her. How he bitterly regretted the coarse sex he tried to force on her... was it four or five years ago? How time flies. If only he'd accepted it was Charlie's child she was bearing things would have worked out differently. She might still be part of his business ventures and, as everyone knows, one thing always leads to another....

Even so, although Charles denied him lone access to June, whether business or personal, he had at least accepted her continuing with designing a few sketches each season. But meeting occasionally to discuss her ideas wasn't enough: her genius for design had severely declined. Moreover, he wanted her body as well as her creative flair. For, in spite of all the sexy women on offer, she was the only one he lusted after — forbidden goods? Maybe, after all he was used to getting his own way. He was pretty sure that deep down, she wanted him too.

And here she sat, all by herself even though both she and Charles were expecting him to call that afternoon. In spite of having put on a little weight she appeared incredibly provocative. The shape of her firm large nipples stood out from under her white gypsy blouse — quite an intoxicating sight. What's more, with bare feet and legs showing beneath a long flowing gypsy skirt, did this suggest no underwear on this hot afternoon? He smiled: *hot* indeed. He might make a lot of money from producing high quality lingerie but, as a mere male, women desiring bodily freedom had his full approbation.

'Hello, June,' he said softly; to speak louder would have been a violation of the peaceful scene.

'Rob! I didn't see you.' Clearly startled, she looked at her watch. 'Golly, is it *that* late? I forgot the time. But surely you must be early? Yes, at least half an hour.' Flustered, she began gathering her things together. 'This is dreadful. I came here to get my thoughts sorted out. I haven't even changed, for goodness sake.'

'You look all right to me.'

'Nonsense! I look quite wild.' She stood up. 'I really must get back to the house and tidy myself up. These clothes are most unsuitable for a business meeting.'

'Dressed like a nymph of the woods? What could be more appropriate for an arboreal setting on a sunny day? But I guess we must have our meeting inside... Charles not home yet?'

'He's at work. Apparently something came up which needed his attention.' She began picking up her things. 'We can have our meeting on the terrace. It's much too nice to be inside on a day like this.'

'If you're sure it's okay to be alone, that's great.' He threw down his briefcase and the jacket he'd been carrying. Taking the blanket from her he spread it out on the grass. 'In that case, we might as well stay here. It's

quite inspirational.' He loosened his tie and sat on the rug, offering a place by his side.

He studied her carefully as she hesitated before gracefully lowering herself to sit sideways to him. He could sense her nervousness. Fear about her work? Or excitement of what might happen between them? After all, why still be outside rather than in the house getting ready for his arrival? Didn't realise the time? No, he couldn't buy that. She wanted him all right — here in an ideal setting, dressed for what she hoped would take place. Intriguing! His libido now rising in tune with his speculations, he forced himself to think of the business he'd come to discuss.

He opened his briefcase and took out various papers and fabric samples.

'I noticed the two little ones with your sister in the conservatory. Where are the others?' he asked, wanting to know how long they had before being interrupted.

'Rosie is teaching, of course. David and Peter are sailing; making the most of the good weather before going back to Cambridge. Jimmy is at school.'

She had her head down, looking intently at the swatches of fabric. Did she know what was on his mind? Of course she did.

'I was hoping to see James today.' Why would she persist in calling their son Jimmy?

'That's all right, he's expecting you.'

'Good.'

He watched her unenthusiastic handling of a piece of finely striped, woollen fabric, feeling its texture while looking at a sketch.

'He'll be home just after four. Rosie's picking him up. He can join us for a cup of tea in the conservatory.' She glanced at him almost shyly. 'That is, if you can stay that long.'

‘Of course. But what about Charles?’

‘Charlie won’t mind. He won’t be home until this evening.’ She lowered her eyes. ‘Of course, he knows you’re here today.’

‘Really?’

She smiled nervously. ‘Yes... I guess he’s prepared to trust you after all this time.’

‘But can I trust myself?’

It amused him to see her aroused by his presence: voice, eyes and body language betraying her true feelings. As he gazed intently at her legs and upwards to her breasts, her nipples were actually hardening into stiff peaks beneath the fine fabric of her blouse. She couldn’t help herself. Obviously, she wanted him — needed him — badly. Charles not man enough to satisfy her? Or was she merely bored by mundane living and needed a bit of excitement in her life? Probably both.

Meeting with her during the past few years had been strictly business, and he’d always been the perfect gentleman. He couldn’t be otherwise with Charles always close by. She might like to think herself capable of controlling his captivating ways, but he knew better. Of course, part of her — the rational mind — wanted him to get on with business matters and go. But the darker side of her nature demanded the sexual stimulation of his presence. He had seen and felt it so many times before. Overpowering her inhibitions was the thrill of the chase.

‘I think I’m quite safe,’ she said after a few moments, her voice belying her attempt to be calmly controlled. She looked up into his eyes and smiled. ‘Haven’t I proved I can protect myself?’

The recollection of her foot reaching his groin became vividly alive. Bending over, he brought his hands to his crotch and groaned as though in agony. ‘The memory of it lingers.’

He burst out laughing, and was pleased to see her laughing with him. Things were going well.

‘I deserved everything I got,’ he told her seriously. ‘I’ve been wanting to say for ages how sorry I am for the way I behaved.’

That he should apologise for something he’d done deliberately, was a very unusual event and he knew it would throw her off balance. For a brief moment he could see her wondering what was behind it. But then she lowered her eyes and her expression became serious.

‘Actually, Rob, I too wanted to apologise,’ she said softly. ‘I should never have accepted your ring when I was in love with Charles.’

It was Charlie Boy’s ring she should have rejected as far as Robert was concerned. Surely she must be regretting it now, stuck in the middle of nowhere and beyond the world of fashion. Love and babies had their place, but domesticity in this setting could only drag her down. She lacked verve, originality and vision. Her casual appearance was but a symptom of her decay. What’s more — she knew it.

‘But I’m not sorry for defending myself,’ she continued, sounding a little embarrassed. ‘After all, I was pregnant at the time. But I do feel bad that you slipped and had that awful accident. I didn’t hate you. I only wanted to stop you, not put you in hospital for weeks.’

Rob smiled: June was claiming responsibility for the whole disastrous episode. He picked up her sketches and quickly looked through them. ‘Pretty good,’ he told her but thinking he’d seen better in newspaper adverts aimed at Plain-Jane Dowdy. ‘I’ve brought some swatches of our latest medium-weight fabrics with me,’ he added, getting them out of his case. ‘I think some of your outfits have potential for the country cottons range. Of course, they will need a little modifying.’

If he wanted her back working alongside him again, now was the time to whet her appetite. While she was

examining the fabric samples, he brought her up to date with his company's market position, leading on to his plans for expansion. As expected, his labels continued to sell well throughout the United Kingdom, and outlets for his leisure and sports clothing, with his new Stag label, were spreading to all major cities and tourist towns within the UK. Moreover, his clothing empire was burgeoning abroad where the garments were manufactured and sold under license. Now he intended concentrating his design and marketing headquarters in the Lakes area to add character to a variety of Stag labels. 'It will certainly impress our clients,' he told her proudly.

'But won't they object to all the travelling?'

'The clients I'm thinking of will be brought here in my personal helicopter. I have one on order, and my chauffeur Bradley is learning to fly it. They will, of course, be invited to stay over at the house. Stag Rock will bowl them over.'

She frowned. 'You will be running the business from the house? I didn't realise it was that big.'

'Of course not, although my private office will be there. The conversion of the old mill — you know, by the river on my Stag Rock estate — is almost complete. From now on, Steven Blake will be running the design and manufacturing end of our regular garment business from our Midlands base. He's ready for it. Apart from centring my various property and financial interests up here, I want to give my personal attention to building up the Stag label.'

'I see. I didn't know the mill was part of Stag Rock.'

'It was part of the original estate. Years ago, it became redundant and was sold off to pay taxes. After I bought the house, the mill came up for auction. I realised its potential and bought it when I acquired the derelict cottages close by. Selling the restored cottages is paying for the mill's conversion. The house has already doubled in value, but that will not be sold off. I am making it my permanent home. I have just sold the Old Rectory in the

East Midlands. That was a damned good investment. You can't lose on property.'

'Does that mean you will be seeing more of Jimmy?'

What was the matter with the woman? Exciting new business developments and all she could think about was family matters? The rot had truly set in.

'Do you object?' he asked her.

'I guess not. He's old enough to know what he wants.'

Whether June objected or not, his son would soon be living with him at Stag Rock; he would make sure of it. Maybe the boy was an unexpected result of a single adulterous night during her marriage to that idiot Arthur, but James was his only child and essential to his plans.

'We can discuss our son when things are more settled,' he told her, endeavouring not to betray the irritation he was feeling. 'What I have planned will be of enormous benefit to James. It could also be a new beginning for you.'

'A new beginning for me? Sounds intriguing.' A new light shone in her eyes, but it quickly faded. 'It's no use, Rob, I don't think I—'

'Stop right there!' He lifted his hands in a gesture of frustration. 'Hear me out, woman, before you start putting yourself down.'

She dropped her eyes and fiddled with the fabric. 'I was only going to say... never mind, it doesn't matter.'

'No, it doesn't. There's a lot to tell you. By the time I've finished you'll see exactly where you fit in. First you need to grasp the general picture. It's been a long time since we've had a proper discussion. Now we're alone, I know I can make things happen for you. And you know it too.'

She looked at him from under her eyelashes but, with cheeks flushed, quickly turned her gaze away. Excitement? Thoughts of a sexual nature? He rubbed his thumb into the deep dimple of his chin and smiled; things will soon

be happening. Under the trees in that glorious setting? But business first.

‘We have been preparing to enter an upmarket version of the catalogue trade. It will be run from Steven’s end. I’ve already taken on experienced staff and premises to handle it. Of course, Steven will have overall responsibility and will be answerable only to me.’

‘You’re putting a lot on that young man’s shoulders,’ she commented. ‘Steven must still be in his twenties, or maybe early thirties. Is he up to it?’

‘June,’ he sighed, shaking his head. ‘Away from the cut-and-thrust of business, what do you know about Steven Blake’s potential or anything else? After years of working beside me, he knows exactly how I work. Surely, even you must realise that.’

The look on her face told him she was pained by the rebuke. Not surprising, after once working at top management level, she was now nothing but a has-been.

‘Yes, of course,’ she conceded. ‘He’s the obvious choice.’

‘Glad you approve,’ he retorted, deliberately adding a little salt to her stinging wound. He picked up the fabric and sketch she had placed together. ‘After all, Steven is the one who works on your ideas to give them a chance of success.’ He tossed the sketch and fabric back to her. ‘Yes, that combination should work well by the time Steven has made a few necessary adjustments.’

‘He does a good job,’ she said, giving him a feeble smile, clearly uncertain as to whether she was being praised or belittled. ‘Steven is very capable, creative too. I forget how time has passed me by. At his age, you were building up your business on a huge scale.’

‘And I intend to continue building it up. You’ve heard nothing so far.’

After going into more detail about the catalogue venture, he came to what he knew would bring her to life: he intended making his name in the lucrative teenage market.

‘Think of it, June,’ he urged, clenching his fists with enthusiasm. ‘Be thrilled by it... a whole new enterprise! Teenagers are far more conscious of what they wear than even a few years ago. Now it’s normal for both parents to work, their kids are pampered beyond belief. Their pocket money is akin to what teens used to get in their pay packets! Youngsters have never had it so good. What happens? Boredom sets in. So, the emerging trend is anything that is anti-establishment; even anti anything considered fashionable.’

He thumped the ground. ‘We will provide the punkish clothes for them to rip, tear and fray according to their own personal statement. The garments will be black, purple, murky and just plain drab. Belts, straps, safety pins, studs, thongs, flaps, pendants — you name it — will be incorporated into the garments to provide the necessary adjustments.’ He threw his hands in the air excitedly. ‘Can’t you just see it? The kids will have a ball doing their own thing!’

She didn’t answer, but he sensed that a rapid change in her mood was taking place... like the old days when she so easily absorbed his own enthusiasm for the work they did together.

‘Sounds utterly absurd I know, but we have done our market research and this will be a lucrative winner. And for the less outrageous, we’ll provide tacky patched jeans with flares so wide they’ll be trendsetters! The new label will be Stag Rock. It might be a mere offshoot of Stag Leisure and Sports, but you have to admit it’s a classy name for the anti brigade!’

‘It certainly has a good feel about it.’

‘Erotically stimulating, don’t you think? And it will be in all major stores within a month... less if I get a deal going with a new outworking firm in the Midlands.’

He could see she was gripped. Her eyes were big and sparkling and her whole body tensed with excitement. Years were dropping away from her as she sat enthralled by his enthusiastic account.

‘Gosh, that’s wonderful, Rob.’

‘Of course, we’ll have to be on our toes. Fashion is fleeting and our new label will have to be up front, not trailing behind. It’s not enough to go with the flow, relying on better style, fit and trimmings; we have to take in the whole gamut of the pop scene, and gain insight of the teenage psyche!’

Having run out of steam, he nodded reflectively. ‘It’s quite a challenge for our design team.’

‘Yes, indeed. How very *exciting*,’ she responded enthusiastically. But the light in her eyes quickly faded. ‘I love it here with Charles and the children,’ she said wistfully, ‘but I feel so outside of things.’ She picked up one of her sketches. ‘What can *I* do? I’ve lost my spark. I’m *useless*; everything I do has to be altered. You know it’s true.’ She threw the sketch aside contemptuously. ‘Why do you bother with my designs? I’m not putting anything into your business any more.’

Tears of anger and frustration sparkled in the corners of her eyes. She picked up another sketch and tore it to pieces.

He made no attempt to stop her, for he knew, to his cost, the truth of her words. It was good to have her acknowledge it. But he also knew that he, and he alone, had the power to change things.

‘You know why I want you tied up with me,’ he said, a hint of bitterness in his voice. ‘You are the mother of my son, and the only woman I have ever asked to marry me.’

She sat silent, looking towards the lake. He watched a tear roll down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away with her hand.

‘Anyway, most of your fabric patterns are promising even if your dress designs are not up to scratch.’

The painful truth of having her own comments confirmed drew lines of unhappiness around her eyes and mouth. He *wanted* to hurt her, wanted her to suffer the consequences of leaving him for Charles. But he also wanted to heal her and bring her back to his side. Once she was under his control, her creative genius would ignite and flare with its former radiance. She would lose her mumsy image and become a vibrant woman. But more than that, with her beside him, he himself would be whole again, just as she would be.

He gently touched her hand. ‘June, nothing has left you. Come back to me. I can bring your gift to life.’

She was still avoiding eye contact. He drew closer to her. ‘You can do anything you want to do,’ he murmured softly. ‘Charles won’t stop you.’

A breeze blew across the lake, breaking the reflected sky and hills into glittering ripples. Not a boat was in sight. There was no sound or movement on land other than those of nature. They were completely alone with no one to see or hear them. Rob placed his hands on June’s cheeks and turned her face towards him. She had tears in her eyes. He lifted up her chin, putting his other hand through her rich brown hair. She didn’t resist him. Her eyes half-closed and her lips began to part. He lightly kissed her, moving his hand from her cheek to brush against a breast. He could feel her body tensing with desire.

‘Rob, I shouldn’t be doing this,’ she whispered.

‘Do you want me to leave you alone?’ He was absolutely certain she did not. He moved his lips over her cheeks and eyes.

'No, no,' she moaned softly.

'No, you want me to go on? Or no, you want me to stop?'

'Yes.'

He instantly pulled away.

'No, don't, not yet,' she begged. 'I want you to breathe new life into me like you used to do. My designs will always fail without you in my life.'

'Quite true. Charles knows it too. He knew we would be alone together, didn't he?'

'Yes,' she whispered, dropping her eyes.

'I guess that guy really loves you. But I love you too.' He gripped her shoulders hard. She flinched but didn't complain. 'But my love is far more demanding: *ruthless*, as you know only too well.'

'Oh Rob, I feel so mixed up,' she muttered tearfully. 'I don't know what I want anymore. But Charlie mustn't get hurt. I'd rather give up designing altogether than have that happen.'

'No need for anyone to get hurt,' he told her, moving his lips over her neck and shoulders. 'We're alone with no one to disturb us.'

Pushing her gently on to her back, he brought his mouth down over her open lips, engaging his tongue in sensuous pleasure. Moving a hand inside her blouse he felt the fullness of her breasts, delighting to find her nipples responding to his touch.

'No, Rob,' she panted. 'No more, we must go inside now.'

'Come on, you know what you really want,' he breathed softly. 'Isn't that why you were here by the lake?'

She didn't answer him. Just turned her eyes away.

He knew she was feeling guilty of betrayal. It was the same old story. Yet she desperately wanted him to go on;

all his women did. But she was different: she wanted more than his body. She was longing for his energising power to revitalise the creative force within her. Only her love for Charlie was making her hesitate and put up a show of resistance, of that he was certain. Breaking down that barrier of conscience, and igniting the embers of a past torrid affair was a gratifying challenge.

June was a fool to have married her dead husband's brother. She belonged to the exciting, adrenaline-pumping, risky world that he himself inhabited. He felt certain that Charles had come to accept the truth of it. Any full-blooded male would rather have an exciting, high-spirited wife who had the occasional affair, than a domesticated pet of a woman. He was determined she would come alive again, to him and to herself. He glanced around him. In the privacy of the surrounding shrubs and trees, he intended going all the way. He knew there would be no need for coercion. Before long she would be opening up to him, eager for his forceful penetration.

Pulling the elasticised neck of her blouse down over her breasts, his mouth found and gripped a rigid mound. Encouraged by her soft moaning, he lifted the hem of her skirt and moved his hand up the inside of her thighs. He smiled at the sharp intake of breath as he reached his goal.

'No more,' she softly pleaded.

'No more?' he teased.

She was ready for him all right, hot and moist, quite delectable. His seducing fingers increased their arousing movements, causing her to gasp with ecstasy.

He closed his mouth over hers.

She suddenly pushed his face away. 'It's going too far.'

'We'll see,' he whispered. 'Just relax.'

Whatever she may plead, the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes were begging him to go on.

He pulled aside her skirt and looked on her nakedness. The object of his desire was deliciously inviting, and he had no intention of denying himself the sweetest of pleasures. He bent over to satisfy his craving. It would be hard for him to stop now. As he breathed in her feminine scent, gripping sensations were urging him forward to taste of its source.

‘Rob,’ she sighed, ‘how can I resist you? You are part of me.’

Such a perfect setting: sounds of songbirds and whispering leaves joined with her sighs and soft moaning. Dappled sunlight played on her face, aglow with hedonistic pleasure. Soon she began panting... gasping... groaning.

He was groaning with her. The time was ripe — perfect. As he exposed his own body to the sun and pleasant breeze, he heard what he knew would come. Her voice was urgent... begging... pleading: ‘Oh, yes, yes...’

She opened to him like a blossoming flower, the luscious folds enticing him inwards. His penetration was deep and forceful and she groaned loudly with the pleasure of it. Before long, he sensed her reaching a state of ecstatic euphoria. He swiftly changed their positions, pulling her hard on to him. Finally, he allowed himself to let go and experience the rapture with her.

Exuberant cries rent their throats.

The startled birds above them flew up into the air as though joining their joyful and liberating release. Leaves fluttered to earth. Rob relaxed. It had been perfect, absolutely perfect.

Resting, June contented by his side, Robert smiled broadly: he had won her back. Once again, he had ignited her lust for life, and as far as he was concerned, however deep her relationship to Charles, she could never escape her need of him. She loved him all right, of that he was convinced. But it was a joining of souls that ran deep within her subconscious. Her sexual hunger was earthy

and primitive and that was the way he liked it. Today was just a beginning. Next time, he would satisfy those deeper inner urges she rarely admitted to.

The next step was to have her working with him again. That was where she belonged, in the business world, not living like a story-book rabbit. He laughed at his own thoughts. Unless things changed, she would even be looking like a mummy bunny — round and cosy and greying at the edges!

She glanced at him quizzically. 'What's funny?'

'Oh, just laughing at the absurdness of human activity.'

She smiled. 'Yes, it is rather hilarious, but somehow very beautiful.'

He stopped himself from grinning. 'Better get tidied up,' he told her, getting back on track. 'We have things to discuss.'

Things indeed. She was coming back to him. With him to inspire her, he knew her designs would once again have that certain flair little short of genius. Stag Rock was now a new beginning for both of them. His considerable wealth and power was proof enough of his business acumen. But as to an affair of the heart? Of course he was never short of mere sex, but he was yet to prove himself in a loving relationship.