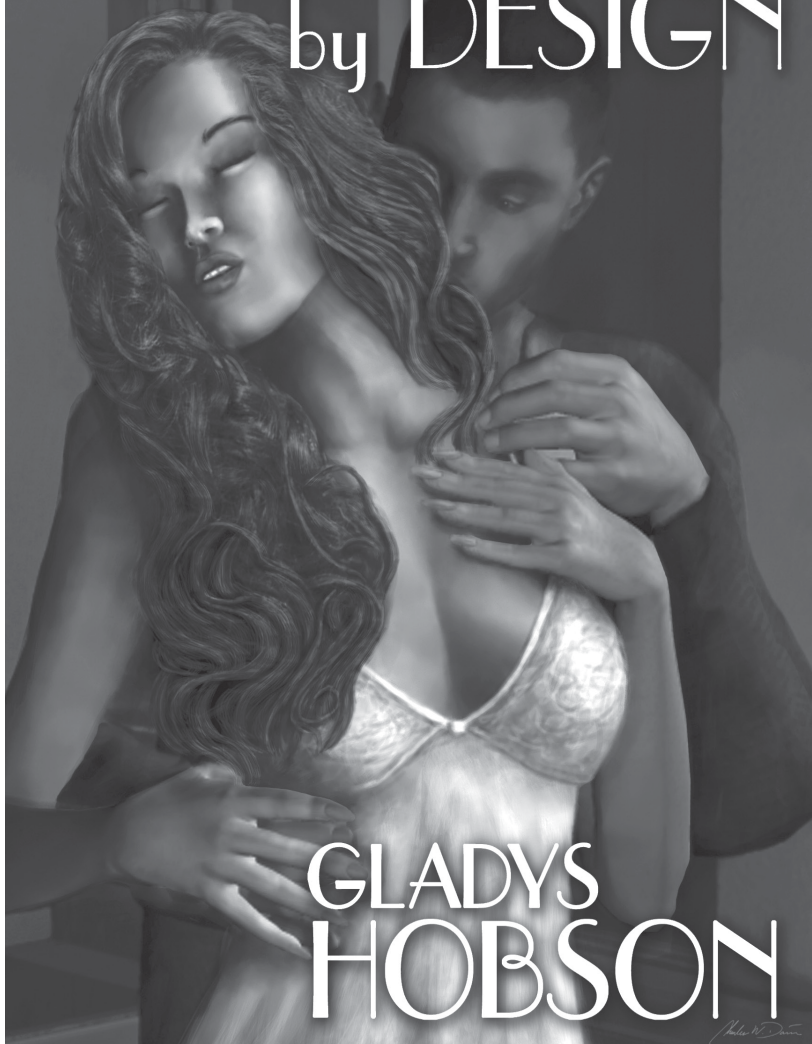


SEDUCTION by DESIGN



GLADYS
HOBSON

John W. D. Jones

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Seduction by Design
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Cover picture by Charles Davis

Printed by Direct-POD
www.direct-pod.com

Copyright © 2010 Magpies Nest Publishing
ISBN 978-0-9548885-3-4
Magpies Nest Publishing
seduction@magpiesnestpublishing.co.uk

May be ordered from bookshops or directly at
www.magpiesnestpublishing.co.uk

My thanks to all, family, friends and critics, who have encouraged and supported me as an author .
A special mention to Simon Hobson for his valuable contribution to the book's production.

Seduction By Design is a sequel to Awakening Love,
also published by Magpies Nest Publishing.

The third part of the trilogy is called Checkmate

Prologue

Spring 1959

Feeling hot and sticky from the day's activities, June took a quick shower before slipping into the exquisite white nightdress Rob had given her to try on. Just the feel of its silky smoothness clinging to her body, and the sight of peaked nipples peeping through the lacy top, changed her self-perception. She now felt herself to be a highly desirable woman.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she saw hazel eyes, bright with the surge of sexual pleasure, smiling back at her. Now brushing her dark curly hair, aglow with chestnut highlights, she was pleased to see her pleasant oval face had lost the ageing lines of emotional stress. The youth of her twenty-eight years had been regained — no, more than that, she felt, and looked, younger and more alive than she had done for several years.

She put down her brush and smoothed her hands over her full breasts and down the luxurious fabric to her hips. The strength of her sexuality began to rise even further. She knew Rob had given her the garment deliberately; he understood such things.

She was anxious to know if she was still attractive to him. For reassurance, nothing more. Nervously, she walked to the door, eager yet fearful to enter the bedroom knowing in the depth of her heart what the encounter might lead to.

Much to her surprise, Rob had changed into a black silk kimono, and was looking ruthlessly sexy. He turned and gazed at her. An appreciative smile curled his full lips

and softened his chiselled features. In his usual manner when judging clothes, he rubbed a thumb into the deep hollow of his chin. But combined with the narrowing of his penetrating eyes under their heavy brows, the simple action conveyed to her a much deeper meaning.

‘Beautiful,’ was all he said. But the way that he said it quickened her heartbeat and brought colour to her cheeks.

She could see the effect she was having on him. He was so obviously aroused, and it thrilled her. He told her to turn around and show off the back of the nightdress. But she knew what he really wanted and her body tensed in anticipation. He came up close behind, pulling her to him and smoothing his hands over her body. Through the thin garment she could feel him hard against her. Then his mouth — so soft and moist — touched her neck and shoulders. Her spine tensed and curved as he continued to pleasure her.

‘You are adorable,’ he whispered in her ear.

She felt his fingers slip under the straps of the gown, and she trembled as it slithered to the floor... a soft silky pool around her ankles. Now his hands were fondling her breasts. Oh, yes, yes... sending her into phantom journeys of erotic delight.

‘No more, no more,’ she moaned unconvincingly.

He turned her to face him, sweeping his eyes down her tensed-up body. She felt them piercing into her sensitive flesh, causing her to shiver in expectation of what was to come.

‘No more?’ he whispered mockingly.

She caught her breath, knowing what he would do to her. Her body was aglow and she could not resist him. ‘No more—’ A sharp intake of breath silenced her pleading: ‘Ahhh!’

He was mouthing her breasts, radiating sensations to the whole of her body. She heard herself panting as his tongue followed his fingers on a downward path. She longed to give in to hedonistic pleasure. Earthy passion was urging

her: yes, oh, yes. But feelings of guilt told her to resist. She had never been unfaithful to her husband.

‘No, don’t. Please don’t. I can’t do this.’

She knew she was free to go; he wasn’t holding her. But she was thrilled by what he was doing to her and she couldn’t escape her desire for more. More. More. Oh, yes, more! Her back arched with the pleasure of it and she groaned in ecstasy. Her eyes closed to the intensity of the rapture.

She felt herself being lifted up. Conscience finally subdued by desire, she fell easily into his arms. There was no help for it: he could do with her as he pleased.

Chapter One

July 1969

Captain Charles Rogers sat in his Mercedes thinking about making love to his sister-in-law, June Rogers. Years of self-denial, at least as far as June was concerned, had never lessened his sexual urges every time he thought about her. But now that possession of her had become a possibility, his erotic thoughts of exploring her beautiful body had a habit of spilling over into orgasmic responses — even before his imagination could get as far as the ultimate penetration.

He had been driving for hours, and needed time to unwind and get his thoughts together before reaching his destination. Parking his silver Mercedes in the lay-by to eat his sandwiches had seemed like a good idea, but he was finding it hard to take his mind off what his body was crying out for.

He brought to memory June's reactions when he'd visited her a little while after his brother Arthur's funeral: her response to his touch, her expression of joy at seeing him again and her acceptance of his kiss. The ashes of a much earlier romance were certainly far from dead.

More than anything else he wanted to marry her, but he would accept anything she was willing to give. Could a love that flourished twenty years earlier burst into flame once more? She was still in her thirties, a brilliant designer, elegant and good-looking. For certain, he would not be the only one to desire her: as a wife, a business partner, or simply to get her into bed.

Such thoughts renewed his urgings. How on earth would he be able to cope with living so close to her? With his appetite for women, voluntary abstinence from the fairer sex whilst waiting for June was not going to be easy; neither would close contact with her look-alike daughter.

Sighing deeply, he put aside the remains of his sandwiches and screwed the top back onto his flask of tea. Time to move on and face the future so full of possibilities, whether pleasurable or disappointing. Deep in thought, he automatically put the car into gear and drove the last few miles to his new home — Bloomfield. On reaching the familiar avenue of mature lime trees, he turned into the drive and parked the Mercedes in front of the substantial brick-and-stone Victorian residence.

There she was at the open door, dressed in a youthful yellow-flowered dress. As he left the car, she came running down the steps to greet him, her rich brown hair bobbing around her bare shoulders, and her face flushed with excitement. As he bent over to kiss her, she threw her arms around his neck and fully responded. Even though it was only done in greeting, there was both warmth and desire in that embrace.

‘Charlie, it’s so lovely to see you,’ she said, pulling a little away from him, as though afraid of her aroused emotions. ‘Just bring your small bags for now. We can get the rest of your things later.’

As she turned to his car to reach for a bag, he tenderly caught her arm. ‘Are you sure you want an old sea-dog cluttering up your place?’

‘Oh, Charlie, we all want you here. The boys are so excited that you’re staying. And you know you’re Rosie’s favourite uncle.’

Charles framed June’s face with his hands and looked down into her gold-flecked, hazel eyes, searching for her feelings about him. They were bright and shining, moist with happiness. How he longed to speak passionately of his

love for her, to take her inside and consummate that love, but he knew that must wait.

‘You know, you are still the girl I fell in love with,’ he said tenderly. ‘You look too young to be Rosie’s mother. You haven’t changed a bit since that night I took you dancing, and people stood and watched because you looked so beautiful.’

‘They stood and watched because you were such a wonderful dancer. You even made me seem good. It was rather wonderful.’

He was thrilled that June remembered the night he had spoken of his love for her. He kissed her gently and gave her a hug.

‘That was a real night to remember,’ he said, releasing her. ‘We must go dancing again sometime.’

‘That will be lovely. I know it’s what Arthur wanted,’ she said, shying away from his concentrated gaze. ‘Maybe in a few months’ time. Now let’s get you inside.’

He detected a sudden cooling of the situation. Hardly surprising: it was only five months since Arthur’s funeral. Now he was feeling guilty of trespass, and no doubt June had her own conflicting emotions to contend with. No matter what Arthur had requested, in fact, begged of him, their personal grief would take time to heal and feelings of transgression were not easily abated.

They carried a few of the smaller items of luggage through the porch and into the large panelled hall. Like all the main rooms, it had a fine moulded ceiling and elaborate cornices. He looked around him, nostalgia tugging at his heart. Yes, most of the furniture had changed since he was a boy, but the grandfather clock was still ticking, keeping alive poignant memories of times happy and sad. His last visits, coming to see Arthur when he was dying and afterwards to visit June in her grief, seemed both far away and yet so near. Putting aside such powerful thoughts and feelings, he followed his

dead brother's wife up the first flight of carpeted stairs and listened to her cheerful chatter.

'I've had the whole of the upper floor, apart from the storage rooms, converted into an apartment for you,' she said as they reached the landing and approached the door to the top floor. 'I hope you will like the furnishings. I designed the whole scheme myself. But perhaps I should have consulted you first.'

'Not at all,' he said, concerned at her self-doubt. 'Whatever you have done will be lovely. But you had that floor previously converted to workrooms for your design business. Do you have new premises?'

'No. I guess I let things go into decline when Arthur was ill. When he died, I lost interest. I seemed to lose it... the inspiration I mean. I had no heart for the work. I felt dead inside and it showed in my designs. Hardly surprising the business went into decline. Then my cutter-fitter landed a top job in London, and the rest of them went to work for Robert Watson. I have my studio and I still design fabrics for Rob. He doesn't know it yet, but Rosie has done most of the dress designing.'

'Good for her. Just like her mum, beautiful and gifted.'

June sighed as she opened the door to the stairs of his new apartment. 'Not any more as far as I'm concerned, but Rosie has a lot of talent.'

They reached the top floor hallway and put down the bags. He turned and held her shoulders, firmly but gently. 'It will come back, June. Once you get inspired, ideas will just flow from you. You need to get away from sad memories for a while and start to live again. You can't possibly lose such a precious gift. It just needs reawakening.'

She dropped her eyes. 'Start to live again? That's exactly what Rob wrote to me when Arthur died. "Start to live again, the door is open." When I left Watson's to marry Arthur, Robert told me that one day I would be back working for

him. But I'm afraid, Charlie. Once I get really inspired I get carried away.'

He felt her body give a little shudder. Drawing her head to the firmness of his chest, he held her closely in his arms as though to protect her from all harm.

'Let go, June, it's better to live dangerously than to be dead to life. Arthur knew that. Didn't he encourage you to go on with your work even when you were prepared to give it up for love of him?'

'Yes. But he didn't want Robert Watson to take me over body and soul. Didn't he tell you, Charlie? He negotiated with Rob on my behalf. I guess Arthur knew me better than I knew myself.'

'Yes, I can believe that.'

But Robert Watson could be discussed later. His own relationship with June was far more important at that moment. 'Show me around this place,' he told her with sudden enthusiasm. 'If the rest of it is as good as the hall, I'll give this flat a five star rating!'

He put a hand on June's shoulder and they walked around his new home. The rooms had a masculine feel about them. He admired the green leather armchairs, cream-and-green carpeting, dark G-Plan furniture and built-in bookshelves in his large sitting room. The enlarged bathroom, with its white five-piece suite, had walls bright with mirrors and glossy black tiles; a thick brick-red carpet was covering the floor, and green towels and foliage added a sense of outdoor freshness. Everything was to his taste, including the luxurious fitted bedroom furnished in deep-blue and white with splashes of red. He looked at the king-size bed with longing in his heart. His wishful thinking didn't escape June's notice.

'One day, Charlie, it's what I want too. It's been well over a year since I had sex with Arthur. At least, full sex, if you know what I mean.' She sighed deeply. 'I must confess, I've

missed it. Arthur always made it so good. Even when he became impotent, he did his best to make up for it.'

Tears glistened in June's eyes. Charles felt her pain in his own heart. He took her from the bedroom and suggested he made them a pot of tea.

'I'll do it, you finish looking around,' she told him, forcing a cheerful smile.

While she made the tea in the kitchen, he peeped into the huge attic storerooms filled with old furniture he recognised from his youth. Standing on a small mahogany table, was a model sailing ship he'd made when he was a boy. He picked it up and took it to the kitchen.

'Arthur helped me make this boat. He helped me with so many things in life. But how come it's so clean and polished?'

'When your parents moved out, Arthur found it in the attic. He brought it out, cleaned and mended it, and said it must always be there for you when you returned home. It's funny, as if Arthur knew you would be back here one day. He said something about bees to honey. I'm not sure what he meant though. I suppose the attraction of this place.'

Charles laughed. 'Not the place, June. The person in it! Father always said you were like honey... sweet and innocent. He was right. I guess he found you attractive himself. We old men still find youth attractive you know.'

'Come off it, Charlie! You're only fifty tomorrow.' She swept her eyes over him. 'And still as handsome as ever.'

'Flattery will get you everywhere!'

'Right, in that case....' She grinned and cocked her head coquettishly. 'Tall, broad shouldered and in good trim. Fantastic tan, and what a gorgeous smile. Such strong white teeth! Nicely shaped nose. Big mouth with lips ripe for kissing. Oh yes, and lovely dark bedroom eyes.'

Charles tried to pull his thoughts away from the picture her words had generated in his mind. 'I am indeed flattered.'

‘And we must not forget that glossy dark hair, as seen in the best hair cream adverts. Even that tinge of grey is rather sexy!’

They both laughed. Charles had to rest the boat on the table. ‘Well, with a testimonial like that I should win the Hunk of the Year competition!’

He sat down and picked up his cup of tea. ‘Better drink this before it gets cold.’ After a moment’s reflection, he asked her, ‘Are you going to walk through Robert Watson’s door and start to live again?’

June sat down opposite him. She picked up her cup. He watched her closely as, deep in thought, she turned a finger around the golden rim.

‘I don’t think so. You see, Charlie, there’s something you don’t know about me and Rob. Yes, he could make me come alive again, but there’s a dark side to him and that affects me too. Anyway, I have to see him. Sooner rather than later.’

‘You mean about your youngest son, James?’

June looked at him wide-eyed. ‘You know about Jimmy?’

‘Arthur told me. When he asked me to take care of you, he thought it only fair I should know what I would be taking on.’

‘You can still love me, knowing what happened?’

‘Arthur never stopped loving you. In fact, he blamed himself for what happened. Heavens! Who am I to judge an angel like you? Me, former lecher, unfaithful husband of a faithless wife, and not short of the odd affair since I was divorced from Angela.’

‘I’m no angel, and it wasn’t Arthur’s fault. I don’t know what he told you but I must take all the blame. You have to know the truth — the real truth — of what happened.’

‘June, if you want to tell me, I’m willing to listen, but I’m more inclined to believe my brother.’

‘You may judge differently when you hear the facts,’ she said, taking a sip of her tea and putting down the cup. Her

finger again circled the cup's golden rim. She looked up and gave him a nervous smile. 'As you know, about the time Peter was born, your father was getting Arthur seriously involved in politics. That brought him into close contact with your father's secretary, Betty Butler. I knew Betty was in love with Arthur, even if Arthur refused to acknowledge it.'

'I remember Betty helping Arthur out sometimes, but she didn't seem the type to split up a marriage.'

'Betty didn't do anything, really, but she was always in the background. After Peter's birth, I became tired and depressed. Arthur made sure I had all the help I needed, but everything seemed an emotional burden. It all became a vicious circle. My work fell off and I lost some of my customers. I became even more depressed and inspiration failed me. Our lovemaking became less exciting and less frequent. I was constantly tired. The children got on my nerves. I felt I was a bad mother and an even worse wife. I lost interest in my work. In everything. And so it went on.'

Charles took hold of her hands to reassure her. 'I'm so sorry,' he said, sensing her pain. 'I should have realised at the time, but I guess I was too tied up with my own marital problems. I suppose Arthur felt powerless to help you.'

'He tried to be at home more, but he was under a lot of pressure at the time. He was going to give up the political work but I knew his thoughts were on Parliament. I wanted him to get there, Charlie. Arthur seemed so right for the work.'

'I guess he took after Father. I suppose that's where Betty came in. She was really good in politics and probably helped him quite a bit.'

'Yes, but Betty is only part of the story.' She glanced down, sighing. He gently squeezed her hand. She looked up again and gave him a forced smile. 'When my designing fell off, Rob could easily have ended our contract, but instead he asked me to design clothes for children. Since I

was involved with children, he said it might inspire me to design for them.'

'So Robert Watson was close to you at that time?'

'Yes, but at a distance. His main concern has always been profitable business. Then he wanted me to get involved with a new line in lingerie. He asked me to go to London with him. I said that Arthur was away — in London, as it so happened — and I didn't want to leave the children. Rob said I was being ridiculous; a change would be good for all of us. He suggested I go and surprise Arthur by turning up to sleep with him at night. Rob has always believed sexual satisfaction helps creativity to flow. He should know... after all, he is a successful entrepreneur in the world of fashion with quite a reputation where women are concerned.'

'You said that once you get inspired, you get carried away. Is that what happened with Rob? Is that what you're afraid of now?'

She slowly nodded. 'Not without reason.' She rose from her chair and walked over to the window. A breeze had sprung up and the curtains — bright red and white check to match the red pots and utensils — were flapping wildly. She closed the window a little and sat down again. 'I went to London with Rob and we visited the shops and some of his contacts. It was wonderful. Rob refused to let me be weary or dull. He took me to Arthur's hotel, saying to stay the night. We were to have a business discussion the next day, but he said not to rush my time with Arthur.... I had never known Rob to be so considerate.'

Charles was aware that June was beginning to tremble, and he asked her if she really wanted to go on.

'Yes... I must. You have to know what happened.'

While he waited for her to continue, he poured them both another cup of tea. 'Take your time. There's no hurry.'

'Arthur was in his dressing gown when he opened his door. At first, he seemed pleasantly surprised, but suddenly he looked concerned. I soon found out why — Betty was

sitting there! I can see her now, dressed in a pretty silk dressing gown. Then I noticed the wet hair.'

'Wet hair? They had showered and were relaxing in their dressing-gowns?'

'Said like that, it sounds so innocent. But you see, our lovemaking often started in the shower. Seeing Betty — a woman in love — dressed in that flimsy garment and with her hair wet through, made me think of only one thing. I ran off. I saw Rob in the hotel bar and begged him to take me away from there.'

'What did Rob think about it?'

'He was happy to take me to his hotel, but he said that I was being stupid about the whole thing. He said it was ridiculous for me not to expect Arthur to have a change occasionally, and that I should do the same thing.'

Charles nodded. 'I guess he was getting you prepared for just that.'

'Do you really think so? I must admit I hadn't thought of what happened that night as being premeditated by Rob.' She was thoughtful for a moment or two. 'Maybe you're right. Well, he shook me and told me to forget Arthur and concentrate on the job in hand. The lingerie we'd bought that day was spread around Rob's room. It was so pretty and feminine that my enthusiasm returned. After discussing possibilities for our own range, he approached me again about going back to work with him full time.'

'Give up your other work?'

'Yes. He was about to expand his business and it was all so exciting. I let go of Arthur... the children... my responsibilities, and just for a while contemplated being back in the swim of things.'

Even as June was speaking, her face lit up with remembered zeal for her design work. Clearly, it meant a lot to her. He must try and get her back into the fashion business. It was what Arthur would have wanted.

'It probably did you a lot of good, no matter what happened afterwards.'

'I don't know, Charlie. You had better hear the rest of the story.' She closed her eyes a moment as though to view the long-ago scene. 'Rob handed me a gorgeous silk-and-lace nightdress. He told me to try it on in his bathroom. I couldn't refuse. I was dying to see what it looked like on. It had been a hot day so I took a quick shower to freshen up. As I said, it was an expensive garment and I didn't want to soil it. Well, that is what I told myself. But, was that the real reason? I very much doubt that I was being honest with myself.'

'But June, we all have mixed motives for everything we do,' Charles told her, worried that she was about to accuse herself of premeditated adultery. 'Being complicated is what makes us human.'

She smiled. 'Dear Charlie, always ready to think the best of me. You'll see for yourself that I was not the good little wife you imagine me to be.'

'I'll take some convincing otherwise. It seems to me Rob set you up,' he told her with conviction. 'Anyway, I interrupted you. Please go on with the story.'

'When I put the nightdress on, I felt somehow different. It clung to my figure and was quite revealing. I felt myself to be a desirable woman, instead of a sexless creature.'

'Sexless? You were never that. Every time I visited your home, you always looked so lovely.'

'You might think that, but there were times when I hated myself for being selfish and always wanting Arthur to be with me, especially in our bed. I detested myself for not being the mother I ought to be, or the wife I should be. I thought myself ungrateful for having so much and yet wanting more. Hatred made me ugly.'

Charles squeezed her hand. 'You're too hard on yourself.'

She shook her head. 'Perhaps you only see in me, what you want to see. Anyway, after talking fashion with Rob I was lifted out of myself. And then putting on that nightdress

and seeing myself in the mirror, well, I began to see a young alluring woman. Rob understands these things. It's what he tries to get in his designs. You know, clothes with sex appeal. Clothes that make women feel good about themselves. I guess he knew the effect the nightdress would have on me. I wanted to see if I was still attractive to him after eight years... sort of confirm what I could see in the mirror. I went back into his bedroom and found him stripped and wearing a kimono.'

'Watson certainly knew what he was doing. He trapped you when you were most vulnerable.'

'Maybe,' she said thoughtfully. 'But perhaps I wanted to be trapped.'

For a few moments she closed her eyes, as if reliving her feelings at that time.

'He looked so handsome and sexy in that black silk kimono. I can see him now, with his dark curly hair flopping over those smouldering eyes of his. It was so obvious that he was aroused. It thrilled me, Charlie, really thrilled me.' She ran a finger around the gold rim of her cup. 'And he knew it,' she added, nodding her head. 'He came behind me and I could feel him hard against my body. I wanted to pull away before things got too far, but part of me was desperate for love — torrid love.' She put her hands over her eyes and was silent for a moment.

'Would you like to stop now?'

She shook her head, and once again traced the cup's rim. 'He kissed my neck and smoothed his hands down my body, running his fingers all the way down my spine, and I mean *all* the way. That's something I find irresistible.'

Charles made a mental note for the future. He was finding it hard to stay detached. He could see the scene before his eyes and it was most disturbing.

'He slipped the straps of my gown over my shoulders. The nightdress slithered to the floor.'

She stopped again, her eyes far away, her breath becoming more rapid. 'He caressed my body with his mouth... if you know what I mean?'

'I certainly do,' he told her, his throat dry and his voice a little husky.

He watched her closely, his imagination working in tune with her memories. He realised he was being considerably aroused, and hoped she would soon finish her story before he had to rush to the bathroom.

'The point is, Charlie, I couldn't help myself. I was thrilled — ecstatic! I loved every moment of his love-play. Then Rob picked me up and put me on the bed. He didn't rape me, like he did on the factory floor all those years ago, because I was a willing partner. I wanted it, craved for it. But I felt as guilty as hell. I wanted his lovemaking to really hurt. You know, punish me for being wicked. But it didn't. It was terrific. Rob went on, harder and harder, until... well... you know.'

Charles was now sweating profusely. 'Yes, I know,' he said, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the neck of his shirt.

'When I got home, Arthur was already there and worried sick. He explained about Betty and I felt so ashamed. He was surprised that I wasn't angry and that I actually believed him. But then, of course, I had to tell him what had happened with Rob. Arthur was so understanding. He must have been badly hurt, but he hid his own feelings and said that he was as much to blame.'

Charles nodded in agreement. It was what Arthur had told him.

'Our lovemaking grew stronger and I was also happier with my designing. Rob kept his distance but we got on well with the lingerie range. In a way, Arthur was grateful to Rob for renewing my creativity, but he still hated him. He made sure that we met as little as possible and never alone. When James was born we hoped it was Arthur's child, but a blood test told us otherwise. I guess we knew it all along. Jimmy is so like Robert. He has a similar build,

and that same determined chin with the deep hollow. Both have dark, thick unruly hair. If Robert ever saw him and knew his exact age, he would know that Jimmy is his son. What's more, with Robert getting more in the public eye, who knows what may be conjectured?

'I can see the problem. Perhaps...'

Sounds of heavy footsteps and noisy chatter told Charles his first visitors had arrived.

'Uncle Charlie! Uncle Charlie!' James yelled, throwing his arms around Charles. 'Will you take us sailing?'

'Can we sail the Scottish lochs, Uncle?' Peter butted in.

David's deeper voice sounded above the others: 'No! Uncle Charlie said we could sail the Caribbean. He promised us.'

'Yes, David, I did promise. It was something I was planning with your father. It had to be cancelled, but we can do it next year. I'll talk it over with your mother.'

'A Caribbean trip will need a lot of planning,' June said. 'We were in the early stages when Arthur was taken ill. I'll have to think about it.'

The children started shouting all at once. Charles was about to quell them when June raised her voice.

'Downstairs, all of you. Let your uncle settle in.' She ushered them out, going downstairs with them. 'Get yourselves washed ready for dinner.'

Just as their protests faded, Rosie arrived at the top of the stairs. Charles had to catch his breath. With her summer tan, fresh complexion, bright hazel eyes and flowing dark hair, she looked so much like June had done at seventeen. But her clothes were certainly different. She was wearing the briefest of miniskirts below a red strapless top, showing off her comely breasts and gorgeous shapely legs to great advantage. Charles made a mental note not to walk up the stairs behind her. He stood up.

'Nice to see you again, Rosie.'

She came up to him, hands on hips and sweetly smiling. 'Hello, Charlie, it's good to see you,' she said in a silky voice. 'I hope you'll be happy here. If I can do anything — anything at all — to make you more comfortable, just let me know.'

'Thank you, Rosie, I'll keep that in mind,' he said, hoping the suggestive manner of her welcome was not a harbinger of trouble ahead. 'What a mature young woman stands before me. No longer that shy little girl I once knew.'

'I have never been a shy little girl. You must be thinking of my mother when she was young. Daddy used to tell me about my innocent, shy mother.' She looked him in the eye. 'He told me that you loved her too. Are you going to marry her?'

With her posing seductively by the kitchen cabinet just a few feet away, he was expecting her to throw her arms around him any second. He offered her a seat at the kitchen table. She slid herself into the chair and crossed her legs. He sat down opposite her. He felt safer with the table between them.

'I take it you would be happy with the idea,' he said, trying to ignore her exposed bare thighs.

'I know it's what Daddy wanted,' she said, squirming round in her seat to pick up a gold-rimmed red cup from the worktop. Charles closed his eyes — worried she was about to pop out of her clinging top. 'I think Mum wants it too, but I guess she's still too upset to think about marrying again.'

She poured milk into her cup and drained the pot of its stale tea. 'I think the boys need a father. Mum's too soft with them. The sooner you live with us for good, the better it will be.' Her eyes, with their long lashes, were peering at him quizzically over her cup of tea.

Charles rose from his chair, ostensibly to put the kettle on, but really to escape his discomfort. 'Well, it's nice to know I have your approval,' he said cheerfully.

Rosie slithered out of her chair. 'It will be nice to have you around the house, Charlie.'

Throwing her arms around his neck, she stretched up on her toes and kissed him full on the lips. He didn't want to push her away too abruptly and risk tantrums, but she was putting him into a sweat. After almost ten seconds, he gently pulled himself away. He foresaw problems looming. The last thing he wanted was finding Rosie slipping into his bed in the middle of the night.

'That was rather nice, young Rosie. But for my sake, perhaps we should keep any kissing to a peck on the cheek.' He said this firmly, but with a gentle smile.

'If you say so, but we both know you enjoyed it as much as I did,' she said, glancing downwards.

'Can't deny it, can I? I'm only a vulnerable horny male. But it's not good for either of us. I'm your father's brother. Sorry, my lovely niece, but it's not allowed, which is just as well, since I'm an old foggy who's in love with your mother.'

'I'm not proposing marriage, Uncle,' she said, looking at him from under her lashes. 'You have experience of many women. Everyone knows that. But, Uncle, you should get with it. Flower power is here to stay, and I'll be your Rosie-bud any day.'

'Now then, young lady, you're only trying to shock me. Or worse still, trying to see what you can do to my anatomy. So stop kidding me, woman, and go help your mother get my dinner.'

'Chauvinist piggy!'

Rosie disappeared down the stairs, leaving Charles sighing with relief and hoping she really was kidding him. Taking on Rosie, her demanding teenage brothers, and that particular problem concerning young James as part of a marriage package, was going to be quite an experience. Not only that, but June's relationship to Robert Watson was also a potential threat to future happiness. Well, he had dealt with worse things in the Navy — or had he?