

Awakening Love



Gladys Hobson

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To Diane

Note from the author

When I was young there were no such things as mobile phones or electronic games. We had few toys and life was full of simple pleasures. My friend, Brenda, lived across the road behind a high brick wall. She lived in a huge house, or so it seemed compared with our three-bedroom semi. At one time, the house was owned by people who had servants – the bell system was still in place. The huge garden once had a tennis court, pavilion, greenhouse, potting shed, root store, fruit and vegetable plots, flower borders, an orchard, and even a toilet tucked away in a corner. There was a courtyard, washhouse, tool shed, and a stable-carriage house with loft. The front garden was rich with mature trees. Like so many things, the house has gone and the whole area converted to flats. The factories where I worked as a designer are no more. Nottingham's industrial base seems to have given way to student and business accommodation: textile factories have become expensive apartments.

The setting of this novel is the Nottingham area as I knew it. The factory scenes and 'primitive' washday at the Armstrong's are authentic, as is much of the background to this story. Certain things were still on ration, coal was in short supply and petrol on coupons. My friend's home, although far from the luxury of Bloomfield, inspired part of the background, and certain activities at that house – dancing with my friend, sewing to earn money, making a ballet dress, playing tennis, and being kissed passionately by her much older brother – actually happened. A few years ago, when writing my illustrated book of childhood memories – *When Phones Were Immobile and Lived in*

Red Boxes – I recalled these happenings and pondered on ‘What if?’ My imagination took wings. My friend and her family became socially superior, and instead of my innocent secret kissing sessions petering out, they turned into a full-blown passionate love affair. Likewise, although I entered a factory to train in dress designing, there certainly was no sexy entrepreneur to assist me up a ladder of success! So it is true to say that all characters and events in this novel are purely fictitious and bear no resemblance to persons living or dead.

Prologue

Summer, 1949

'Oh, come on, June, give me a chance to prove we're a perfect team. You don't need anyone else for sex. Believe me, it doesn't come any better.'

She struggled to free herself. 'Let me go at once! I'm going home. You've no right to stop me.'

He gripped her arms and captivated her with his smouldering eyes. 'You're *nothing* without me. I've made you as a designer, now let me show you what else I can do for you.' He bent his head to kiss her again.

She turned her face away. 'No, Rob. Let me go!'

Still holding on to her arms, he pushed her a little way from him. A lecherous look crept over his face. His deep dimples became rugged clefts and his dark eyes glittered under their heavy brows. His smile twisted with lustful intent. When he spoke, his voice was deep and seductive. There was no mistaking the true meaning of his words: 'We have business to finish first.'

Excited by his compelling sexuality but fearful of what he might do, her heart raced inside her breast. 'I've had enough of your business for today.' Her voice quivered uncontrollably.

'We haven't done anything... yet!'

She was terrified by her inability to control the situation. 'Let me go! Let me go!'

But he pulled her to the carpeted floor and pinned her down.

'Come on, just relax,' he said calmly, as though talking to an overwrought child.

'Get off me! Get off!'

She pushed and thumped but knew she was powerless to move him. Under his weight, struggling was quite useless; she was just burning up energy. She waited for him to make a move so she could act: kick, scratch, knee him in the groin.

'Okay, you win,' he said suddenly, lifting himself up and turning away.

She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. But when she moved to get up she saw his belt unbuckled and his fly flapping open. He'd tricked her!

Quickly pinning her down again, he murmured softly, 'Don't struggle. Do you want me to hurt you?'

Fear gripped her heart. 'No! No! No! Don't touch me! Let me go!'

She continued to struggle, but he was too strong for her. While kissing her with lips wet with passion, his hand went up her skirt.

She pulled her lips away from his. 'Oh, please, Rob, don't do it. I don't want you to. I really don't.' Her whole body shook with fear.

'See, my sweetie, you're trembling for it. You want me just as much as I want you. Admit it. I know the signs. Playing hard to get turns you on. Okay, let's do it your way.'

He tore at the bodice of her dress, stripping off the buttons. He pulled the widened neck over her shoulders, trapping her arms and exposing her breasts. She was powerless to stop his wet mouth moving sensuously over her peaked nipples. Her body was on fire and she was filled with a potent mixture of dread and guilt. Dread of what was going to happen, and guilt because part of her wanted, desperately, to experience his torrid lovemaking.

Her juices were flowing. Soon, very soon, he would discover it for himself and play on it. He must not get that far. She renewed her efforts to free herself, screaming again and again. But Rob merely increased the fervour of his love-play.

'Leave me alone! You can't do this to me!' she yelled. 'I'm Arthur's. He'll *kill* you!'

'Stop struggling and enjoy it. We both know what you want all right. Old Arthur's no match for a real man. You won't want him near you after this.'

'Please, Rob. Please. Please. Oh, please don't—'

He kissed her mouth and silenced her.

Chapter One

Late summer, 1947

In a state of euphoric excitement, June slipped the veil of a dress over her bare shoulders and watched the white mist float about her. In triumph she pulled up the zip – perfect! Pleased with herself, she looked in the mirror and liked what she saw. True, the net skirt was a little skimpy, and the lace top barely covered her breasts, but she'd used up every inch of the scrap material she'd been given so it would have to do. And it would do nicely – very nicely indeed. Humming a ballet tune, she went up on her toes and did a few twirls.

'Lovely, lovely, lovely!' she squealed joyfully.

'It is indeed,' said a familiar rich voice from the doorway. 'You're a clever young lady.'

'Arthur!'

She was surprised to see him; apart from Mrs Craven, the domestic, she'd thought she was alone in the house. She felt horribly embarrassed. How long had he been standing there?

'I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be in here but I wanted to look in the mirror,' she explained. 'I'd better go. I'm sorry. Really, really sorry. I should have asked.'

'It's quite all right, June. Carry on, I only came for a book I left in here.' His eyes were scanning her body appreciatively. 'Is that for the concert you're doing with Clare? It's very pretty.'

His approval pleased her. 'Yes, the *Swan Lake* bit. Do you really like it?'

'Yes, I really do,' he answered, picking up a heavy leather-bound book from the table and hurrying to the door.

She saw his jacket catch on the doorknob, tearing off a button. The book fell to the floor, its pages splayed. He picked up the weighty tome and examined the damage.

'Bloody hell!' He muttered under his breath, then looked towards her and quickly apologised. 'Sorry, bad habit. Please forgive me.'

'It's okay – you should hear my dad swear. He was a sergeant in the army. Oops!' She put a hand to her mouth. 'I'm sorry, I forgot; you were in the army too, Major Rogers.' She wanted to say something nice to cover up her blunder. 'Clare says you've got lots of medals.'

'A few maybe, but so have many others. Some didn't live to collect them.' He sounded bitter. Clutching his book, he picked up the button from his jacket and turned to leave. 'Enjoy your concert.'

She had seen the pain etched into his face, and felt guilty at stirring up tragic wartime memories. She wanted to make things better.

'If you give me your jacket, I'll soon stitch the button back on, Major Rogers.'

He smiled, turning the lines of pain into expressions of pleasure. 'Arthur will do, June. I'm not in the army now.' He took off his coat and gave it to her. 'Oh dear, looks as if the material has torn away.'

In a house full of highly-educated people, it made her feel good to be able to do something they couldn't. 'Give me your button. I'll soon mend the tear,' she said with childlike enthusiasm. 'I'm good at sewing.'

She felt his penetrating look as his eyes took in the ballet dress she was wearing.

He cleared his throat. 'I can see that. Well, I'd better leave you to it. Thanks, I'll come back for the jacket later.'

Book under arm, he quickly left the room, keeping well clear of the door.

She watched him go and then examined the jacket. It was going to need a bit of invisible sewing. Humming to herself, she set to work, enjoying the challenge. Her thoughts were on Arthur, and her mind went back to their first meeting. She relived the surprise of seeing him a few days after he had come home from the war and finding out who he was.

'Gosh, he looks old enough to be your dad,' she had remarked to her friend Clare, the major's younger sister.

'Well, Arthur is the eldest. He's twenty years older than I am. Anyway, you wouldn't look so young yourself if you'd been through what he has. He was lucky to be badly injured – most of his men were killed. You should see all his medals. Arthur's a war hero, you know.'

Arthur was quite unlike his tall, handsome, dark-haired younger brothers. His fair hair was tinged with grey and his face bore the lines of experience. He was five feet nine inches tall and his body seemed to be too thin for his broad shoulders. He may have looked more like Trevor Howard than her heartthrob Gregory Peck, but when he looked at her, his brilliant blue eyes fascinated her and made her feel all funny inside.

June brought her mind back to the present, imagining Arthur sitting alone by the fire with his book, the morning sunlight streaming through the windows tinting his hair with gold. He seemed to enjoy his own company away from the others.

She looked around her. The large room was furnished with rich mahogany furniture: intricately-carved sideboard, dining table to seat twelve, heavy but elegant cushioned chairs, a long serving table, magnificent display

cabinet and a huge heavy mirror over the mantelpiece. Comfortable maroon leather armchairs were placed either side of the marble fireplace, the grate of which glowed with the remnants of a log fire. A thick, deep-blue carpet covered the floor and rich blue-and-silver brocade curtains hung each side of the two tall windows that overlooked the gardens. Awesome mouldings, just like the ones in the town's old library, framed and patterned the ceiling. It was the same richness all over the house, and so unlike her own home. Colonel and Mrs Rogers certainly wouldn't have any of their utility matchwood in their exquisite Bloomfield – not unless it was chopped up for firewood! Well, one day she would make it to the top and have nice things too – and she would get there through her own efforts.

Thinking about the day when she would be a celebrated designer with lovely clothes to wear and a beautiful home to live in, the time seemed to pass by quickly. She looked at her finished work. The tear was now quite invisible and the button stitched on to perfection.

'Good,' she muttered to herself, and was about to get changed when she decided to try out a few ballet steps to music. Colonel Rogers wasn't due back for ages, and Mrs Rogers wouldn't mind her playing her own record on their posh radiogram – too bad if she did! She giggled at her audacity, and went into the big front lounge with her *Swan Lake* record.

Sitting in his bedroom trying to read, Arthur was in a bit of a sweat. He'd entered the room just as the dress was veiling June's semi-naked body, and he'd been caught off guard by the vision of loveliness before his eyes. For some inexplicable reason he, Major Arthur Rogers, the mature, self-possessed, recently retired war veteran, was embarrassed by his aroused sexual feelings. It was quite ridiculous! The girl must only be sixteen – twenty years

his junior and far too young for him to be experiencing such erotic feelings. And yet he'd had to make a hurried exit before he made a fool of himself. It shouldn't happen, and yet his body cried out to hold her, kiss her, and.... But he refused to acknowledge the full extent of his desires.

As he sat in his room trying to read his book, a year-old memory of the first time she had taken him by surprise flooded his mind. He was home on leave – yes, that was it, just before leaving the army. She had turned up at the house damp from the rain and was looking as sweet and fresh as a rosebud sparkling with dew. Her rich brown hair was twisting in damp curls and her pretty hazel eyes were shining with the vitality of youth. When she spoke, her voice was soft and innocent: completely different from the girls he'd met during the war.

He'd seen her around the house occasionally, but rarely to speak to. He knew she did a little mending and dressmaking for his mother, as well as making dance outfits for Clare. She was bright and cheerful and her girlish prettiness was always appealing, but he'd never been more distracted than by what he had just witnessed. What a sight! The skirt failed to hide those shapely thighs, the flimsy lace revealed her firm, rounded breasts, and her shoulders were completely bare and inviting. Her dark hair flowed over her face when she bent over, partly shrouding her deep cleavage – incredibly provocative. Had she any idea what she did to him?

There was no doubt about it: he was intrigued by that exquisite innocence that seemed to shroud her in an aura of sanctity. But beneath her outward timidity, did he detect a longing to experience something more? To explore her growing sexuality? He reproved himself; she was a mere child. To even ponder her sexuality was a violation of her girlhood virtue.

Finding it impossible to relax, he deliberately turned his mind back to the war years. Controlling one's emotions

had been vital when courage and endurance were needed. He thought of his comrades and what they had all been through together: North Africa and the battles fought in desert heat, then Sicily, Italy, and finally the struggles within Europe for the hard-fought victory. So many lives lost; so much anguish and pain. Incredible suffering that did not distinguish between friend or foe, adult or child. And finally, the discovery of the death camps that made him fully realise what it was all about.

And then there was afterwards... coming home to find his fiancée had left him for a rich American colonel. The loss of his Barbara was a cruel blow. Would he ever trust a girl again? Certainly not an experienced gold-digging society woman: he wanted an innocent girl to love him for himself alone.

Through his open door, sounds of music drifted up from the ground floor. All the family were out, and he'd been surprised to find June in the dining room. Annie Craven certainly wouldn't be playing music in the main part of the house; she was busy in the kitchen anyway. Intrigued, he went down to see if June was having a little dancing practise.

He followed the sound to the lounge. Through the crack in the slightly open door he watched June moving in time to the music. How delightful! Her movements were graceful, and her body so lithe and beautiful. He pulled himself away reluctantly and went to the dining room to see if his jacket had been mended. It had; she'd done a fantastic job and he wanted to tell her so.

The music stopped and he heard a patter of feet. Flushed and happy, she arrived in the dining room carrying her record. She stopped abruptly when she saw him. She was obviously apprehensive.

'You didn't mind me playing my record, did you, Arthur?'

‘Of course not.’ There was a second or two of awkward silence, then he continued, ‘I’ve seen your handiwork – the jacket, that is. An excellent job; you must let me pay you.’

‘No, please, I wanted to do it for you. The button won’t come off again.’ She laughed a little nervously and dropped her eyes. ‘If it does, I’ll buy you a new jacket.’

He smiled at the thought of it. She had no idea of the cost of Savile Row tailoring. He took the coat from her hand. ‘Thanks, but I won’t hold you to it, the button might split and fall off.’ On a sudden impulse, he kissed her lightly on her cheek. ‘It’s kind of you to do it for me. I really appreciate it.’

She lifted her head and gazed at him, her bright hazel eyes caught and held his own. ‘No, not kind. It’s my pleasure, Arthur,’ she said softly.

Whenever she spoke his name, it connected with his inner longing for her. And now her eyes were enticing him to respond. He dropped his jacket and drew close to her, his hands on her shoulders and his lips ready to kiss. But she suddenly dropped her head and blushed deeply.

‘Sorry... I’m so sorry. I’ve embarrassed you,’ he murmured, dropping his hands to his sides and stepping back. ‘I’d better go. Thanks again.’

‘No, you didn’t,’ she said as he was about to pick up his jacket.

He hesitated. His acute sense of propriety held him back. She was just a child, for goodness sake, and he had a man’s hunger for expressive love. But his body cried out for satisfaction: it had been over two years since he had kissed a woman with passion. Apparently she was willing, so why not?

He lightly touched her arms and lowered his lips to hers. But she pulled away and ran giggling towards the door. Was she playing games? No, surely she was just nervous. He pursued her like a lovesick youth and

trapped her against the door with his arms. Standing still with her eyes closed, she didn't try to escape her cage. Her rosy lips were full and moist, held loosely together as though inviting his kisses. He wrapped his arms lovingly around her soft, warm body. There was no resistance. Oh, what bliss!

Gently but firmly he pulled her closer to him, bending his head slowly until their lips met. Wonderful exquisite feelings set his body alight. He gently pressed a little harder and she seemed to melt in his arms. Oh, the wonderful, exquisite agony of being in love.

He knew he had to release her soon; she was far too enticing. But it was hard to control his carnal desires and pull away. He struggled not to touch her insensitively and ruin the moment. It was enough that her lightly-veiled body felt so delectable held close to his. His heart was beating heavily in his breast. There was no denying it; the girl had captivated his soul. He knew it was no excuse for his headstrong behaviour, but it had been so long – so very long – since he'd last held a pretty girl in his arms.

He stroked his cheek against her soft flowing hair, thinking what to say to her. Words of love? But, suddenly, boisterous laughter and jolly voices sounded from the hall. His brothers, Charles and George, must have returned from their tennis match. The spell was now broken and he felt like a love-starved fool caught out in the act. Damn it! He was old enough to know better. What was he thinking of, kissing a girl of sixteen and allowing erotic sensations to control his body? A ridiculous aberration that must not be repeated. Love? Of course not. Simple lust. How could he have thought of it as anything else? He must be mad.

'June... forgive me... I was carried away... I...'

She was looking at him, with a puzzled expression. The voices in the hall grew nearer and he quickly stepped away. 'I'd better go. Sorry, very sorry.' What else could he say?

Passing his brothers with a cursory nod, he returned to his room to gain control over his mind and body. But his passion had to spill out before he could rest. This wouldn't do; it must *not* happen again. She was still a youngster, even if his body told him she was a highly desirable woman. That indeed was the problem. After tasting the delights of sweet innocence, he knew his desire for her would not go away.

Chapter Two

June sat down, trembling with emotion. Afraid of being caught out, she picked up her needle and tried to look busy. Soon she would take her clothes to the cloakroom and change there, but for the moment she needed to calm her nerves.

Her lips were still tingling and her cheeks felt flushed. She couldn't believe that a kiss could move her so deeply. Boys had kissed her before but they had been clumsy and awkward about it, leaving her feeling that kissing was extremely overrated. But this had been altogether different; gentle but passionate. She had felt the hunger of a man's desire in the pressure of his lips. Bewildered and excited, her emotions refused to settle. What was happening to her? She couldn't understand. Was this love or just sex?

'Hello, what's up with Arthur? He came out of here like a bat out of hell!' Dressed in his tennis whites, Charles – Arthur's tall, dark and handsome younger brother – had entered the room without her noticing.

'He was looking for something. A book I think,' June said, trying to sound normal but not entirely succeeding. She glanced up and saw him looking at her rather strangely. 'I think he was in a hurry to go somewhere,' she added, feeling a need to explain Arthur's speedy departure.

'I'm not surprised,' he said, his eyes sweeping admiringly over her thinly-clad body.

Sensitive to his savouring gaze, she felt embarrassed and deeply ashamed of her appearance. It was so inappropriate to be in a flimsy ballet dress in someone else's dining room. Next thing, George would be arriving. Or maybe the Colonel!

'I have to change,' she blurted out, getting up and grabbing her dress to hold in front of her. 'I'll be late home.'

'Pity, you really brighten the old place up,' he told her, smiling appreciatively.

She felt her cheeks colouring even more. 'Thank you, Charlie,' she muttered, stuffing her bits and pieces inside her quilted sewing bag. 'I really must hurry.'

Picking up the rest of her things, she rushed out of the room to change in the cloakroom. In her haste, she almost ran headlong into George, the Colonel's youngest son and a teenage version of Charles.

He stopped in his tracks to look at her. 'I say, you look pretty.'

She dashed by him, keeping her head down. 'Thanks, George. Can't stop,' she said, quickly closing the cloakroom door behind her.

Her heart was beating furiously, her mind was in a daze, and the whole of her flesh seemed to be sensitised. She caught sight of herself in the ornate mirror over the Victorian washbasin. Yes, she did look pretty. The deep pink of her flushed cheeks helped, but her eyes were shining brightly too. Heavens! Her family was bound to notice her face and her shakes. But she had to get out of the house before the rest of the family still living at Bloomfield – Clare, Kate, Colonel and Mrs Rogers – arrived home. Quickly changing, she rolled up her ballet dress and stuffed it into her bag, the white net frothing out like a large dose of liver salts in warm water. She waited until it was quiet in the hall and swiftly made her exit.

She took a shortcut through the courtyard, vegetable patch, orchard and the back garden, avoiding the tennis court where George and a friend were now hitting balls around. When she reached the door in the high wall, her heart sank – it was locked. Butterflies were now fluttering within her. She dodged back again and left by the front drive, breathing a sigh of relief when she finally reached the lane.

Arriving at her end-of-terrace home with its patch of garden, she crept quietly up the stairs to her small bedroom. She dropped her things on a bed already scattered with costumes and pieces of fabric, then cleared a space, sat down and took a deep breath. As she often did after visiting Bloomfield, she looked at her cheap old dressing table cluttered with sewing bits and bobs, her wardrobe with a door that wouldn't close, and the cardboard boxes pushed into corners that overflowed with an assortment of her little treasures. She sighed; one day she would live in a house that had space and modern comforts. But today she had better things to dream about, her emotions were still very much alive and she wanted to hold on to her luscious feelings.

Hearing voices downstairs, she made her way to the bathroom. It was the only place she could hide from her prying brothers and sisters. She locked the door and turned on the taps of the old, rusting bath. But her mother had obviously heard her running the water.

'If you're 'avin' a bath, my girl, don't use all the water,' she yelled up the stairs, 'your dad wants one later.'

June was now in a world where everything was predictable. She closed her eyes to the mean surroundings: dark green and cream painted walls, cracking linoleum, chipped washbasin, and the toilet with its newly-painted seat that stuck to your bottom if you sat on it too long. She lay in the warm water and thought over what had happened. Major Arthur Rogers had kissed her! It had

been just like a movie. He'd looked at her with those piercing blue eyes, and butterflies had danced in her tummy. She'd wanted him to kiss her, but she didn't want him to think she was a tart. Men didn't respect girls who were too willing. But he'd come after her when she'd run away... so maybe it was all right to let him kiss her.

A thrill ran through her body as she relived that kiss over and over and over again. His lips had touched hers ever so gently... mm, yes, quite heavenly, really. Then he'd pressed harder and longer as though he couldn't help himself. Maybe he couldn't. His heart was thumping, thumping, thumping close to her own. She'd felt it. Did he love her?

She thought her way through a great variety of scenarios of what might happen next. No use telling herself that she was being stupid. He had kissed her. Surely that meant something? After all, he was an officer and a gentleman. Well, maybe he kissed lots of girls – but then again, maybe he didn't. She sighed deeply and went on with her dreaming.

From the hall, her mother's voice called out loud and strong, 'Get out of that bathroom, the rest of us need to use it.'

Reluctantly, June pulled herself up and out of the water. As she dried herself, she noticed that her nipples were unusually firm. She looked down at herself. Her breasts seemed to be getting so big. Embarrassed at her own womanhood, she pressed them down, trying to make them look smaller. As her hands came in contact with them, a slight pleasurable sensation ran through her body.

She felt confused, and a flush of shame attacked her face; nice girls and boys did not touch certain parts of their bodies. She'd been touched by dirty old men in crowds and in the cinema, and her mother had been furious when she'd told her about it.

‘Don’t let it happen again. I don’t want folk callin’ a daughter of mine a tart.’

It continued to happen, but she thought it must be her fault they were being dirty, so she didn’t tell her mother. Now here she was, proving it by touching herself. It was only accidental but...

Her mother called again, this time telling her to come down and help with the ironing. She quickly dried herself, dressed, left the bathroom and went downstairs, heading for the kitchen.

Flushed with guilt, she looked in the hall mirror, just visible between the many coats hanging on too few hooks, to see if it noticed. She looked closer. Horror of horrors! Little bruises dappled her lips. Before anyone could see them, she ran to her sister’s room, found her lipstick and put on a thick layer to cover the tell-tale marks of passionate kissing. *That should do it*, she said to herself, and made her way to the kitchen.

She stood back as her father, dressed in his old sergeant’s shirt and trousers, passed her on his way to the bathroom. He stopped and looked at her face in utter disgust.

‘Take that bloody muck off your face,’ he said angrily, ‘or I’ll take it off for you.’

‘But, Dad—’

‘No buts, young lady. No daughter of mine is going out looking like a tart.’ He pushed his thumb roughly across her lips, smearing the lipstick all over her face. ‘Now get it washed off, and come straight back to me in the kitchen for inspection.’

June knew better than to stand and argue. Trying not to cry, she ran upstairs to the bathroom to do as she’d been ordered. She used the nailbrush to scrub her lips hard, hoping to make them deep red so the blue wouldn’t show. Face washed, she went back downstairs for inspection.

She knew he'd be waiting impatiently in the kitchen. She was trembling and close to tears, fearful of what would happen if he saw the bruising.

'That's better,' he began. 'What's this?' He'd seen the tell-tale blue patches. 'Dear God! I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to be so rough. Here, let me kiss you better.'

He kissed her on the top of her head and smoothed her hair. Her nerves were so tensed up that she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'I'm sorry, love. If anyone else had bruised my little girl like that, I would have put the blighter in bed for a week.'

'It's all right, Dad, it really is. It doesn't hurt a bit.'

She was feeling truly guilty now, not only because she'd deceived her dad, but because she'd enjoyed Arthur's bruising kiss. She went back to her bedroom, saying she would do the ironing after some sewing she wanted to finish. She flopped on her bed, oblivious to her ballet dress and sewing bits. Was she so wicked to want Arthur to kiss her again? Would he seek her out and be romantic, like in the films? But he had apologised. Surely that meant he would do no such thing. No – it had been a mistake on his part and he'd regretted doing it. After all, he was old enough to be her father.

She rarely saw him during the following week, and when she did he only gave her the briefest of smiles. She concluded that he had just used her. Even so, her imagination carried her into secret areas of her heart where she longed to experience again the pressure of his lean body against hers, and feel him kissing with lips that held her spellbound. He'd made her feel like a woman and she would never be the same again. It was so strange that in spite of her helpless position, she had felt a curious kind of power over him. And yet he didn't seem to want her anymore. It was awesome, but terribly confusing.

Months passed by: Arthur was never around. Clare told her that he was always working, often spending the night away, so she gave up on any hope of history repeating itself. What a fool she was to have such thoughts. 'Grow up,' she told herself, 'men like Arthur don't fall for girls like me.'

On a cold winter's evening, she was sitting alone in Bloomfield's opulent, thick-carpeted lounge, sewing for Mrs Rogers and thinking how lucky she was. Compared with her boring day job, sewing was more like play. Back home, the front room had linoleum and pegged rag rugs on the floor, and there was an old mock-leather suite to sit on. What bliss to be sitting by a flickering fire, enjoying the luxury of a feather-cushioned armchair, rather than the cold comfort of home with her brothers constantly hassling her. It was such a joy to be at Bloomfield that she would gladly have worked for nothing. Perhaps it was just as well Arthur didn't want her; Mrs Rogers might have sent her packing.

Feeling sleepy, she put down her needle to rest her eyes. Voices sounded in the hall. Arthur was home! Excited, she tried to look busy with her tacking as footsteps came her way. Arthur, cold from his long drive, walked into the room and headed for the fire. As soon as he saw her sitting there, a look of delight spread across his grey, pinched face, easing out the chiselled lines and warming his cheeks to a more pinkish hue. June's heart beat faster with joy and expectation. He was pleased to see her! He did care about her after all.

'Hello, Arthur,' she said shyly.

He spoke to her softly: 'Hello, June, it's a wild old night for you to be out.'

There was nothing waiting for her at home but hot Ovaltine and a cold bedroom. 'I don't mind,' she told him. 'I want to get this finished for your mother.'

Arthur stood with his back to the fire, warming his hands and legs. She looked up and caught him smiling at her. She smiled back and then went on with her sewing, feeling a kind of contentment.

When he spoke again, it was with concern. 'I really think you should be getting home. It was snowing again when I came in. It's quite thick, you know.'

His mother arrived with a tray for him. She put it down on a small table.

'Have a hot drink, Arthur, you must be frozen. There are a few sandwiches too – your favourite, Stilton with pickle.'

Mrs Rogers sat by the fire and picked up her knitting. She looked across at June. 'Don't you think you should be getting home, my dear?'

June didn't want to go. She wanted to be near Arthur. 'I'll just finish this first, Mrs Rogers.'

Arthur crouched over the fire and rubbed his arms. 'Jolly cold driving tonight. It's worse here than London way. Just as well I came home a day early.'

'I'm glad you did, Arthur. I hope your father has as much sense.' Mrs Rogers rose from her seat. 'Sit here by the fire. I'll get you some rum for your cocoa.'

June was alone again with Arthur. Excitement was tensing her nerves. She glanced up and saw him looking at her from the seat opposite. She quickly dropped her eyes.

'Nice fabric,' he said, getting up and moving towards her.

Her heart started beating even faster. 'Yes, it is rather lovely. I don't know where your mother gets it from. Friends in the trade, I suppose.' She was immediately sorry for speaking about something that was none of her business. She quickly added, 'Your mother has impeccable taste.'

'My mother can afford to have whatever taste she wants,' he answered, smiling. He sat down on a pouffe next to her. 'I haven't seen you for a while, are you well?'

She was elated that he was making conversation with her. She looked up from her tacking. 'Yes, thank you. Clare says you've been busy working.'

He was looking at her rather strangely. 'Well, that's certainly true,' he said. He frowned. 'June, I...' He seemed at a loss for words.

She didn't want the embarrassment of him making excuses. 'It's all right, Arthur. I understand.' She dropped her head and pretended to sew. 'You don't have to say anything.'

'I don't want you to think that... no, sorry, what else can you think? I'll let you get on.' He went back to his chair by the fire.

But she couldn't sew. Her mind was again pondering what had happened in the dining room three months earlier. She'd been out with Harry from the office since then. He was the chief clerk and thought a lot of himself. He'd been wanting to take her out since she was fourteen and just the tea girl, but, like all the boys, after a few dates he'd given her up and found a lass more obliging. All males were the same.

Her mind drifted to the ballet dress, the prettiest thing she had ever made for herself. One day she would make herself beautiful clothes to go out in... one day when she had money to spend on such things. She rethreaded her needle and went on sewing the dress for Mrs Rogers and dreaming her dreams. But Arthur kept popping into her consciousness. Every now and then she glanced in his direction but he was now sitting reading, apparently unconcerned at her presence.

Mrs Rogers returned with a bottle of brandy and a glass. 'It seems we are out of rum,' she told Arthur apologetically. 'Have this to go with your drink.'

June couldn't help but notice Arthur was his mother's favourite son. Perhaps it was because he went missing during the war when he was badly wounded. Or maybe she felt closer to him because he was the eldest child, and the only one to fully inherit her fair hair and facial features: clear blue eyes, straight nose, and lips that curled handsomely at the corners.

Mrs Rogers went over to the window and pulled aside a heavy, wine-coloured velvet curtain. 'We seem to have a bad snowstorm, June,' she said, turning to face her. 'You had better leave the sewing and go home before the weather gets even worse. Perhaps Arthur will take you to the end of the lane. I don't want you to have an accident.'

June's heart started to beat faster. 'Is that all right, Arthur? I'm quite happy to go by myself.'

'Arthur will be pleased to escort you,' Mrs Rogers said, speaking for her son. 'There's no one else in except Clare and Kate. I'd rather you not go home alone, I feel responsible for your safety. The pavement is being repaired halfway along the lane and it could be dangerous. You can't use the garden path, the gate will be blocked by drifting snow.'

Five minutes later, thrilled with expectation, June was waiting in the hall. Having swallowed down his warming drink, Arthur arrived, buttoned inside his heavy army coat with the collar turned up. He was smiling pleasantly. 'Ready to go?' he asked her, in his authoritative officer's voice that somehow went with the uniform.

Pulling an astrakhan hat over his hair and ears, Arthur led the way through the flurrying snow, down the tree-lined drive and into the lane beyond.

Just as they were turning the corner, June lost her balance on hidden ice formed by tyre tracks. She fell backwards. Arthur tried to catch her but lost his balance too and landed almost on top of her. Seeing the funny side of it, she giggled nervously and was pleased to find Arthur was laughing with her. He tried to get up and pull her up with him, but he slipped again and they rolled into a snowdrift. Before long, they were flicking snow at each other and laughing like children playing in a white wonderland.

Arthur stood up, dusted clumps of snow from his coat and hat, and helped her over to a sheltering nook in a wall. He carefully brushed the snow from her coat, and then removed his gloves to warm her cheeks with his hands. Lifting her chin, he bent to kiss her. She offered him her lips unreservedly. His ardent kissing aroused within her wonderful and strange feelings. When he murmured softly, 'You are adorable,' she could have wept for joy.

Eventually, he took her by the hand and led her home. Occasionally, he stopped to dust the snow from her face and woolly hat, cup her cheeks with his gentle hands and kiss her waiting lips. She was warmed by the heat of love, and didn't even notice the bitterly cold wind biting at her cheeks. For the rest of the way the snow continued to fall, giving a cloak of silent softness to hide his tender embraces. She had never felt so happy.

Away from the twinkling light of a street lamp, he held her close and whispered, 'June, my dearest, it's been wonderful; you have made me young again.' With just a brief peck on the cheek, he left her standing by her door.

'Goodnight, Arthur,' she whispered softly at his retreating figure. Without making a sound, she mouthed the words: 'Please, please, never stop wanting me.'

That night Arthur lay on his bed thinking over what had happened. He relived the thrill of warming her lips with his kisses and that brief moment on top of her body in the snow. He smiled to himself: if only that snow had been his bed. But he was instantly ashamed of his thoughts; she was far too young and vulnerable for him to allow such images to enter his mind.

But he couldn't stop his imagination working. How far could he go with a sixteen-year-old, and still remain within the bounds of decent behaviour? He realised he was being ridiculous, but in his heart he knew there could never be any other girl for him.

While the nights were dark, he would sometimes volunteer to escort June down the shadowy drive to the gate. There he would quickly, but passionately, kiss her, and with hardly a word see her down the lane. She seemed so happy and eager to be with him, if only for a short time. Surely it was better to get her alone for brief periods than to be completely starved of her presence? But his hunger for her was increasing.

One night, he walked her down the lane and wrapped his arms around her. With moonlight filtering through the trees above them, he looked at her lovely, eager face. She was flowering into a most attractive woman. He had awakened her passionate nature, and the experience had added to her radiant bloom. He knew it without doubt and didn't want to halt that progress to womanhood. She was part of his life now – part of him. He could never let her go.

Pulling her close to him, he found her lips and kissed her without restraint. He gently moved his lips over her face, kissing her eyes, her mouth and her throat. She threw her head back and sighed with the pleasure of it. His heart beat faster and his urges grew stronger.

He wanted to undo their coats and press his body hard against hers, but he resisted the urge. Restraint was

agony. Had he already gone too far? He knew he was being ridiculous to carry on seeing her in such a secretive manner; his feelings were mounting and becoming more and more difficult to control. They should be walking out together, meeting people socially, enjoying theatre visits, dancing together and getting to know and love each other in everyday situations. A normal relationship couldn't possibly be built on sneaky kissing sessions. It wasn't fair on June and it was hellish agony for him.

But there was no choice but to wait until she was a little older, then he could propose marriage. She was almost seventeen. They could be engaged when she was eighteen, however much his parents might object. He'd waited years for Barbara – before the war, and when he was home on leave. They had gone no further than kissing and the lightest of petting, but their relationship, being open and shared by friends and family, was less intense. His love affair with June was between them alone and all the more powerful because of it. Apart from which, he absolutely adored her. Yes, he could – and would – wait.

Back at Bloomfield, he went upstairs to his room, changed into his pyjamas and sat on the bed. He tried to control his urges, but passion had already overtaken him. After showering, he put on a robe and walked down the stairs for an evening drink. His father came out of the games room, billiard cue in hand, and asked him to join him for a few minutes.

Putting chalk on the tip of his cue, the Colonel said casually, 'We are both army men, Arthur. I know what it's like to be without a woman for a long time, but June's much too young. Don't deny you fancy her, I've seen the way you look at her and I know what's happening. She's a pretty little thing but she's just a child; can't be seventeen yet.' He cleared his throat. 'I don't want to interfere in your life – heavens, you're an experienced officer – but I

beg of you, find someone nearer your own age. This affair can only lead to unhappiness for both of you.'

'You may be right, Father, but I love her. Trust me to do the right thing.'

'Your mother has one or two lovely women lined up for you to meet. Do try and be home for her next dinner party. There's one lady in particular she would like you to get to know better.'

'That's kind of her, but I seem to remember I met Barbara at one of her special dinner parties.'

The Colonel cleared his throat more loudly. 'Shame what happened to that woman. She didn't deserve to be engaged to a son of mine. Going off with a damn Yank! You're better rid of her, Arthur – we all are.'

Keeping his emotions under firm control, Arthur left the room bidding his father, 'Goodnight, sir.'