



The Seven Deadly Sins
and Virtues

GREED



Evelyn
Starr

PIROUETTE

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PIROUETTE

The 7 Deadly Sins and Virtues Series

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PIROUETTE

SEVEN SINS AND VIRTUES SERIES

CREED

BY

EVELYN STARR

CHAPTER ONE

She was the most incredible thing Aaron Keller had ever seen.

Here.

In the middle of Godawful. nowhere.

Fascinated and startled, he sank to his knees behind a screen of thick underbrush. Heedless of puddles that stained the knees of his khakis, and sharp-edged gravel that tried to slice through to lay ruin to living flesh beneath...heedless, too, of dripping trees and coastal Delaware drizzle that poured enormous quantities of clammy moisture down the back of his neck, he leaned forward. Closer to the screening shrubbery. Parted it with shaking hands, and peered through the narrow gap. Peered hard and long, eager to get a better look at the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

She was a redhead. And she was magic.

At some point one of Aaron's hands dropped from the branches it held back, narrowing the gap through which he peered.

He hardly noticed.

Finding his crotch, the hand began to massage. And he was glad for the first time...very, very, infinitely glad...that the parcel of land lay so far back from the highway.

As the agent had warned at closing, the place was way the hell off the beaten path. It was rough going, and almost impossible to find, with only a pair of sunken and crumbled

gateposts to mark its forgotten location. The long, overgrown road was rutted beyond belief, rutted to what Aaron could only describe as pure and unadulterated hell. Rutted so badly that he'd finally had to abandon his Range Rover and take to foot. Because even that stout and sturdy old vehicle was no match for boulders the size of cottages and washouts so deep they might as well be the Grand Canyon.

On foot.

Which was just the damned luckiest thing that had ever happened to him.

In the Rover, he'd have missed the fountain. Would never have heard the sounds that had drawn him straight to it, in a bad mood with aching feet and damp nearly to the bone. Clammy-damp, uncomfortable-damp, and mad as a hornet at the goddamned historical preservationists who'd tried to fight him and thwart him at every turn. Who'd thought they had some kind of sacred right to stand up to him. To ruin his plans.

That was when he'd heard the sound of distant water.

Not the sound of steadily-falling rain, because that wasn't really rain at all, as much as a miserable and floating, cloying and penetrating damp. And not the sound of rushing and swishing waves upon the not-too-distant beach, either. He'd heard a musical tinkling. An enchanting sound of laughing droplets.

The sound of a fountain, where no fountain should be.

On his land.

The woman in the fountain was dressed in something pale. Something fluttery, with floating points around her thighs. Something completely unrevealing and yet, when touched by drizzle and the foaming spray of the fountain in which she cavorted, something so absolutely revealing she might as well have been wearing nothing at all.

Hair like fire burned its way down her back. It played around her hips and thighs, flirting with the tattered hem of the indescribable garment she wore.

Flesh like living alabaster gleamed faintly golden in sparking rays from her circle of jetting, curving water. She moved atop some kind of bare marble platform. Something set at the exact center of that circle of jets.

She was a statue. Sprung to life through magic she herself had wrought.

Magic.

Without his input or his permission, Aaron's hand massaged harder, stroking the swollen and aching ridge of flesh beneath the front of his khakis.

Before him, unaware of his presence or his gaze, the woman kicked out with one foot, the toes of it and the fingers of both outstretched hands catching and flinging sapphire-diamond jewels of water. Impervious to its moisture, or seemingly so, she dipped her head forward, then flung it back, a long, low gurgle of mixed laughter and naiad-song slipping from her throat.

Aaron's distended cock lurched.

His clutching hand clutched tighter.

A naiad?

He'd never believed in magic. Only the magic he could make for himself with his wheelings and dealings. Only the supreme, all-desirable and all-else-canceling magic of wielding the power enormous sums of money gave him in the search for more, and then still more.

More power. More *money*.

That was all the magic a man like Aaron Keller needed. All he could ever want.

And yet...

The naiad-woman pirouetted atop her pedestal. Fiery hair flung and mist-cool droplets scattered. Droplets that

fell, bright and bejeweled beads, on that smooth flesh and those burning strands. Beads that lay separate and distinct, never dissolving as he thought they should, into nothing.

As Aaron watched, so enthralled that he forgot the desperate heaviness between his legs and the need to ease it away in any way he could, the woman lifted both arms. Straight up. Straight over her dreaming, upturned face. Slowly...so slowly he wondered he could detect any movement at all...her outflung leg bent. Slowly, deliciously and delightfully slowly, the tip of her toe touched the point of her knee. And still slowly, she raised herself up onto one tiptoe, and paused there. Her body was enticing. Radiant. A long and sinuous, fiery pale curve in the gray gloom of mist that had surely crept closer in these few seconds.

She was a magical creature indeed. Had to be magical...had to be a fountain-spirit at the very least. A fountain-spirit eager to take flight, yet forever imprisoned behind the spouting bars of the water-cage in which she must pose and pirouette, in which she must eternally perform her trapped dance.

Aaron groaned. Softly. Afraid to break the spell of enchantment. Fingers scrabbling now, since he'd realized he could see through the veil of shrubbery without having to part it, he struggled to release himself. Release the burning, dying part of himself into mist-cool air it craved as the only possible balm to its suffering.

There was no fountain here.

Aaron tried again and again to tell himself so.

He tried to make himself believe it.

Oh, he felt certain there had been a fountain. Once. Those damned Revolutionary War Pettys with all their visions of grandeur and being landed gentry...the new royalty...in a new world, with all their pretensions at

royalty, had almost certainly had a fountain here somewhere. Or two. Or even ten, for all he knew or cared about anything those old fools had done or built. But sure as hell those fountains, along with the mansion and everything else in the Pettys' Godforsaken once-upon-a-time had crumbled away to nothing useful. Nothing but ruin.

This, though...

The fire-haired naiad, the marble circle of the prison in which she was sentenced to dance for his amusement, the shining pedestal upon which she danced...these were no crumbling ruins of Revolutionary social climbing.

Yet neither were they real. Neither could they possibly *be* real.

Aaron's fingertips stroked deftly along the underside of his hardened cock. Stroked the minute ridge of flesh that, rather than being cooled or eased by exposure to mist-laden air, only seemed inflamed by it.

This was the reality.

This fantasy, dream, vision. Or whatever the hell other kind of name a person might want to give it.

This walking wet-dream was the reality.

Carefully, Aaron curled the fingers of his left hand around his cock. Just as carefully he reached around and down with his other hand to cup and support sagging balls that had been released when, barely aware, he'd shoved his khakis and boxers all the way down. Off his hips and into the puddled, dirty water around his knees.

God, that felt good!

God, that felt sweet.

The woman...naiad...began to move again. She swayed now. Her muscles and her flesh seemed genuinely to ripple. In long and continuous, ingeniously controlled waves that started in him...in the inner, hidden parts of him as well as

the revealed outer ones he held and caressed so gently...a corresponding ripple. Of preparation. Of eager and self-generating gathering.

And she danced again. Flinging her miraculous hair and her magical jewels, she laughed up, into the gray-misted sky, her movements graceful. Natural. Unfettered by any knowledge of or adherence to established and formalized rules of any version of dance Aaron had ever seen, her movements flowed and floated with strange wildness. *Magic* wildness.

Hands cupped and pressed, one to squeeze firmly in the vain hope he might speed the ongoing process that would in no way be speeded or forced and the other to strum repetitively at aching flesh in the search for that same elusive release. Aaron knew his mouth had opened. He knew his expression had frozen, quite possibly permanently, into a grimace of the purest, most abject suffering it was possible for a man to feel.

The stroking had little effect.

In fact it had quite the opposite of the desired effect.

Beneath ministrations meant entirely for the pleasure of relief, his cock continued to swell. To harden and to ache. With pain unimaginable, pain unbearable and unconscionable.

The sudden scream that escaped his lips before he could think to stop it, before he had a clue it was coming, a scream that started in tortured lungs and immovable diaphragm as a real and genuine scream of agony, escaped his lips as nothing more than a whispered whistle. Surely inaudible to anyone away from himself, and barely audible even *to* himself.

But the naiad-woman hesitated. Faltering in the midst of one of her impossibly perfect if clumsily rough and untrained pirouettes, she glanced around. No longer a self-

assured magical creature made up of water, and mist, and a man's most fevered imagination, she seemed in that moment to be entirely human. Entirely of the world Aaron knew and the reality he'd all but rejected in less than the time it took to catch himself with his hands and turn himself over to all his inadequate ministrations.

The naiad-woman seemed to look straight at him. And his heart froze in mid-beat. As did his hands in mid-stroke.

Then her gaze moved on. Circling the perfectly manicured swatch of grass in which the fountain sat. A swatch bounded on all sides by dense forest and shrubbery that gave it privacy. And on one by a sighing, murmuring hint of the sea.

Aaron's heart resumed its beating.

Because of course she wasn't real. None of this was real. How could it be...how could the fire-haired woman, the fountain, the velvet carpet of mown lawn, be real, when all of this was his and none of was supposed to be here?

His, damn it!

Upon the thought the hard-ridged flesh between his hands pulsed and beat as even the sight of the naiad hadn't made it do.

His. Smiling, he pulsed again as the naiad, with another uncertain glance around, took up her magical, imprisoned dance again.

All of this was his. All the old Petty holding, from the state highway two miles behind him to the sea still hidden ahead. All the crumbling remains of too-grand gardens and ridiculously lordly walls that represented in his mind nothing more than an appalling waste of habitable land..

All his. Purchased just two days ago from an ancient asshole who'd had some damned-fool notion of giving it away for a song to the historical people. Until Aaron caught wind of it, of course, and sweetened the pot just enough

that the old fart reconsidered. The old fart hadn't been able to resist.

Smiling, applying himself with full vigor to a cock that actually danced and cavorted with delight now that his mind had turned to something *really* appealing, Aaron began to beat his meat like there was no tomorrow.

Revival At Petty's Beach.

He salivated at the vision of it.

He could run up scores of cheap pre-fab vacation condos on his newest piece of land. Condos for city dwellers desperate for a taste of the beach. He could jam them in from the road to the very edge of the sand cheek-by-jowl. Could jam them in with barely room to fit a car...oops, better make that an SUV with the kind of gullible idiots he'd be selling to...between. He could sell them for a goddamned fortune each.

Smile widening, he salivated more. He almost *came* across his eager and working hands when he thought of how much money he could ask...and get...for just one of the glorified shoeboxes he'd build right here. It would be enough to pay for the whole she-bang. With a fortune left over, all for him. All so he could buy more wasted land, somewhere else. And more, and more, and *more*!

What a concept.

The preservationists would howl, of course, Didn't they always?

They were already howling, for all the good it was going to do them. Because his bulldozers were already on their way. *His* bulldozers. In the hands of *his* personally chosen men, who wouldn't give a shit about all that history crap any more than he gave a shit. Ready to clear *his* land by knocking down every last trace of the Pettys. Every last trace of their activities...the Revolution they'd thought they played such a part in.

By sunset tomorrow, it would be all over. Too late for anyone but Aaron Keller and a bank account that was just about to reap its delicious rewards.

Oh, and he was so close to another kind of reward too!

His naiad had lost none of her charms.

Briefly he thought about fucking her.

Like any man, he enjoyed fucking for the pleasure it gave him. Enjoyed it as the business deal he always made it. Highly profitable deals, arranged at minimum cost. No cost, even. Whenever he could swing it.

Of course a man couldn't fuck an imaginary creature, could he? He couldn't release his fire-haired naiad from her fragile yet unbreachable prison. No more than it would be wise to try to free her. Or touch her.

Free, touched, handled, she would lose the magic she held for him.

Some things...naiads ranking high among them...were much better seen from a distance. Much better left forever unattainable through lack of trying.

Aaron Keller almost never lost when he set his sights on something he wanted. It went without saying that he was going to be the winner in any battle he chose to engage. And on the few occasions...the exceedingly *rare* ones...when he did lose, he did not like it. Not at all. So he'd developed a strategy. Really a pair of strategies, for situations like this one, where it looked like he could conceivably lose. In the first instance, with something he really, really wanted, something that was going to benefit him enormously in the way of profits realized and dollars in the bank, he went after it tooth and nail. With lawyers gathered round and any means at his disposal, be they legal or not so legal, utilized to the fullest extent possible.

And the other things, the second-case things, like women who might for some inconceivable reason see fit to

turn him down.

He could ruin them outright. Which could be fun. Or, as in the case with the red-headed naiad, he could keep himself at a distance. Keep himself strictly under control as much as possible, and when it wasn't, could restrict his attentions to those he indulged from afar. Those he could carry out on the sly, the way he was carrying them out right now.

The solution to the problem of women, really, was easy as pie. Seduce them quick, pay them cheap, or avoid them altogether. And whatever else he did or didn't do, Aaron had taken to the very wise, very prudent and practical policy of avoiding any intellectual or emotional contact with them. He kept his relations with women...*all* women...on a strictly physical, strictly pay-as-you-go basis.

Life was so much easier that way. His record of success had remained unblemished that way. A true testament to the power and influence money gave him.

This time, though, he sensed it was going to be different.

Already he felt an attachment. He didn't really want to call it an emotional one, because those were so messy. Kneeling in his cover of dripping underbrush, the overheated length of his distended and grievously aggravated cock clutched between hands that did not seem to be making any headway toward even the smallest semblance of relief, he decided it was all due to the magic the naiad had woven. All due to a simple case of a waking wet-dream, and nothing at all to be worried about. If he could just... but oh, God. Oh, Christ. Oh, Jesus.

He'd never hurt like this in his life.

He'd never been so powerless to relieve the hurt. Powerless to...to...

He was going to die. Pure and simple. He was going to

die from the throbbing, scarlet agony between his trembling, no longer steady legs.

Wrapping his fingers tighter around the object of all that suffering, he dragged them down hard. Then dragged them up again. Harder. Paying special attention to the searingly tender bit of skin on his underside, with its insane power to inflict suffering in the guise of pure, ecstatic pleasure.

This time his groan was audible. This time he knew it was, because he heard the low and uneven pulsation of it beat the air around him. And because the woman looked up.

Startled into stillness in mid-step, in the midst of another awkward yet stunningly graceful pirouette with one leg outflung to slice easily and effortlessly through the bars of her 'prison', she looked around. Again.

She looked directly at him this time. And then, 'bars' shattering into sparkling fragments like the jets of water they truly were, the creature of myth and Aaron's sweetest fantasy stepped down from her shimmering marble pedestal. She stepped gracefully down and, her gaze never drifting from the place where he crouched with his cock clutched between leaden hands, she strode straight toward him.

Her steps, every one, were silent on the thick cushion of velvet grass. But every one shot straight to the center of Aaron's faltering, stammering heart like thunder-riddled bolts of hellfire on the march.

CHAPTER TWO

Her first thought was that Daddy or one of his brothers had discovered her secret.

LaMar Chapin had no patience at all for what he called Hedy's 'gol-danged high-falutin' foolishness'. He'd wear her out but good, with the strongest strap he could find if he ever learned she was back here. Dancing. In Miss Tizzie's fountain.

As Daddy was so fond of pointing out, she wasn't so big even at twenty-three that he couldn't teach her a little business out behind the woodpile.

The first time she'd heard the low mutter of a human voice from behind the bushes at the very edge of the fountain clearing, she'd about had a heart attack, thinking her time was finally up.

But if it had been Daddy or one of his bad-tempered brothers, they'd have come from the other direction. From the ocean. And they'd have come blasting out of the bushes at full speed, shouting and hollering all kinds of insults. Most of them featuring the words 'hussy' or 'harlot', their favored words for any female who might try to rise above, use the talents God had given her, and make a better life for herself.

If it had been Daddy or one of the uncles behind those bushes, she'd have already felt the burn of the strap across the backs of her legs and on the bottoms of her feet. 'As a

lesson', he would say. Though he'd make extra sure to keep her cooking, and cleaning, and doing any other kind of labor he could think of that would keep her on her swollen, wounded feet. To keep her from 'gettin' above herself.'

She'd learned to be extra careful. To always pick afternoons when the uncles headed on up to Wilmington to 'pick up wimmin'...an event that always ended with them drunk in some gutter, and occasionally in jail for assault upon one of those less than eager 'wimmin'. Then, and only then she'd slip some of the sleeping pills Miss Tizzie gave her into Daddy's beef stew or his tuna fish casserole.

But had she been careful enough?

In a fury made up halfway of for-real anger and the other half of self-protective fear for her life, Hedy ripped the screen of bushes apart with shaking hands the instant she reached them.

"Did my daddy send you?" she demanded of the man she found there.

Wouldn't put it past him.

"I..."

The man...he was on his knees, and he had his big old white thing in his hands...peered up at her. And she revised her opinion right away.

Even Daddy wouldn't send somebody this obviously stupid.

The kneeling man didn't move. He didn't even seem able to move, when it came right down to it. He just looked up at her, gaping like a fool. A good enough looking fool, for sure with his messed up thatch of fair hair, his non-committal colored eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, and his wide, almost square jaw. But a fool just the same.

"What are you doing there?"

As if she didn't already have a good idea.

"I..." He tried to get up. Tried without much luck

because his pants were down around his knees in a puddle of water and he was still clutching his hardened, protruding shaft. He was trying to hide it from her because there was no way he could tuck it away, back inside his clothes.

Hedy supposed she should be revolted by the idea of him spying on her. Of him exposing himself the way he had, and rubbing himself, and doing whatever else perverts did when they thought they weren't going to get caught.

She supposed she should be outraged.

But she was more curious than anything else.

Twenty-three years old, and this was her first chance ever to get close to a man's private...his more important...parts.

That was just pathetic.

That was just one more benefit of life in Daddy's world. One more benefit of being looked at by the 'nice' folks in these parts...with the single exception of Miss Tizzie, of course...as white trash. Not worth bothering with. Of being domineered by a daddy who was well known as pure trouble, drunk or sober. Pure trouble most often drunk, and waiting for a chance to happen.

She was curious, all right. But it wouldn't do to let the man know that. Because he might get the wrong idea.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded again, hands on her hips and her blackest scowl clamped across her face to hide any questing, questioning, unquestionably interested look she might have.

"A better question might be what *you're* doing here."

"He speaks!"

The man was still having trouble. Lots of trouble, with the swollen thing that wasn't, even to her pretty much inexperienced eyes, about to cooperate any time soon. He hadn't made any more attempts to get to his feet, either. And that gave her something of an advantage. At least for

now.

"I belong here." Her tone turned starchy.

"On my land?" He was having a little more luck now. He hadn't managed to put himself away, but he *had* surged to his feet, and at the sight of him standing Hedy took a step backward.

He was big. All over. He was tall. Broad-shouldered, and muscular. The way the men at the beach were so often very well muscled beneath their clean, bright summer shirts...so attractively muscled that her mouth watered. Her heart took to hitching and twitching, too. In the oddest of ways. Making her wonder what the devil could be wrong with her, anyway.

"Your land?" she inquired, still backing, a little more slowly now. "I think Miss Tizzie might be real interested to hear that. I think she might have a thing or two to say about it, too."

"Yes, *my*...who the hell is Miss Tizzie?"

"Miss Tizannah Barkinsdale. She's the lady who *owns* this place."

"The hell you say." Now the man...Hedy thought it was getting a little bit ridiculous that she'd seen so intimately much of him and *still* didn't have a clue who he was...was frowning. "I'll have you know I bought this land a couple of days ago. All of it. Every inch of it."

"Well, like I said. Miss Tizzie didn't sell anything. She doesn't need to sell anything or want to sell anything. This land belonged to her ancestors, from way back. And she's mighty attached to it. And even if she did decide to sell, she'd never sell my fountain right out from under me. Because she said that someday, when she..."

Hedy couldn't finish the thought.

Dies. Someday when Miss Tizzie *dies*.

She didn't even want to think what her world would be

like when Miss Tizzie did...that. She knew it was coming, of course. Miss Tizzie was no spring chicken, as she herself always said. But when she did, the fountain would belong to Hedy. And the land under it...around it...too.

"Your fountain?" The man sounded like he was getting impatient. Or mad. Or at least pretty blamed aggravated. "You'd better make up your mind to say good-bye to the damned thing. Because in a couple of days all of this is going under. Just as soon as I can get my crews out here."

Alarm replaced the odd jittering-jerking inside Hedy's heart. "Under?" she whispered. "What do you mean, under?"

The man swept an arm around. Past the fountain. All the way around the lawn that surrounded it. Past Miss Tizzie's woods beyond the lawn. It swept all the way around in a wide, wide circle. Including all of it. "I'm building a community here. A nice, profitable vacation community."

"Why, you greedy man!"

"Putting this land to good use," he went on, all wrapped up in what had...*had*...to be some kind of wild and bizarre pipe dream. "It'll be a brand-new beachfront community. To open this whole area up and make it civilized. Make it profitable."

"But..." Hedy's alarm spread. From her heart all the way out to the tips of her fingers and toes. Leaving them cold, dead-feeling. And to her stomach too, to the very bottom where it settled like a sick, twisting, dying thing. "You can't build here even if you could have bought it. This place is..."

"I'd like to see anyone stop me," he growled. "I paid damned good money just for the right to..."

"You *are* a greedy man."

"Sticks and stones..."

"But this land is historical!" Hedy's voice rose. Its tone

was one of mixed anxiety, and fear that maybe Miss Tizzie hadn't told her everything after all. That maybe this man could and would do exactly as he'd said, because he *looked* like he could and would do what he said. "This is the old Petty du..."

"It's a waste of prime real estate. That's what it is. Prime real estate whose time has come to make good money."

"For you."

He shrugged. "Like I said. Sticks and stones..."

"Look. Mr..." Hedy let her voice trail off, hoping he'd take the hint and supply a little of the information she *should* have. Especially if she was going to rush straight to Miss Tizzie as soon as this confrontation was over and report everything. Ask lots of questions about everything and, she dearly hoped, have her fears about everything soothed.

He didn't. He just glared at her. Challenging her. Daring her to tell him he was wrong about anything, even when she knew he was. About everything.

"You don't know what you're doing here."

The man took offense.

Visible offense.

"I beg your pardon."

"This land, especially the part of it that's back there behind you, is historic. There's an old mansion back there in the woods, and you can't just go in there, even if you did own it, and just..."

The man made a rude sound. "A mansion? More like an old pile of falling-down stones that's of no value to anybody. That's all that's back in those woods, and I can't wait to..."

"Have you even seen what's back there, Mr...and would you please, for heaven's sake, at least tell me your name?"

"Keller," he growled. "Aaron Keller. And I don't have

to see anything to know it's a good idea to get rid of that old rubble. The best idea in the world. It's a service to the parents of every kid who might go back in there and get himself hurt to tear it down and..."

"There aren't any kids around here to go back there. And even if there were, you don't care about them. You only care about yourself, and what's in it for you."

"...rip the whole mess out. Put the place to some kind of constructive use for the first time in its *history*."

"Constructive use?" Drawing herself up as tall as she could stand, Hedy felt fresh anger rise. Potent anger, this time. "I won a prize in high school!"

"Well, goody for you."

"I won the class prize for American history. And the idea that you, that anyone could just *ignore* what happened right here...right on this patch of land..."

This man's...this horrible, greedy-ignorant Aaron Keller's...assertion that none of it mattered was more than Hedy could stand. It was so much worse, even, than the sins he'd committed in spying upon her and exposing himself in response to her, that the horribleness of it quite literally took her breath away.

"Those people." Hedy gestured wildly. She swung her arms around in a way her high school gym teacher, the closest she'd ever come to a dancing instructor, had always declared counter-productive, accomplishing nothing at all. "The ones who lived in that house back there, before this was even a country..."

"Miss..." Aaron Keller shook his head slightly, looking aggravatingly, condescendingly amused by her outburst. "I've told you my name. I don't believe I've had the honor of hearing yours."

Honor!

Hedy almost spat.

He was a great one to be spouting off about honor! He had to be the least honorable person she'd ever met. Even more dishonorable than Daddy's disgusting brothers when they went to Wilmington 'lookin' for wimmin'.

He was *despicably* dishonorable, and she barely managed to restrain herself. "Hedy," she declared with a lift of her head.

"Pretty name."

"Mama called me after some old-time movie star she liked. And you're not going to distract me that easily."

"Is that what I'm trying to do?" Aaron's gaze swept over her. Shamelessly. Starting in her more of those peculiar tingles that had nothing to do with anger or annoyance, and everything...too much...to do with the excitement of discovering she'd caught the attention of one very, very attractive man. Whether he was completely honorable or not.

"Hedy what?"

Caught between fuming at his insolent disregard for this special place that had existed undisturbed since the Pettys had gone and a sudden steam of attraction so powerful and all-encompassing she could barely resist its pull, Hedy glared at him. "*What?*"

"Hedy what? What's your last name?"

"I...Chapin. Hedy Chapin, But I really don't see what that has to..."

"Well, Hedy Chapin." Aaron took a step toward her. A step closer. "The plain fact is that this land belongs to me. And I can do whatever I want with it. On it. Now, you're trespassing and we're going to have to do something about that."

Hedy had no idea if that step forward had been meant to threaten, to intimidate. But if it was, it failed miserably.

All she could think about was the new closeness of him.

The luscious heat that radiated from him. All her memory now was of him as she'd first seen him...of the shimmering pale length that would not be soothed by large hands that struggled so valiantly to soothe. All her memory seemed limited to her unexpected flaring of interest in what she'd seen. Extreme interest in *having* what she'd seen.

The tingling had started again. Odd, potent, it vibrated gently in the pit of her stomach and left it vaguely disturbed. Vaguely quivery in a not at all unpleasant way. And it reached out, too. To the tips of her fingers and toes, just as it had before. It reached down, between her legs...

Shuddering as the inner quivering reached hidden places it had no business reaching, it was all Hedy could do not to touch herself there. Not to stroke and caress in ways she knew from personal experience in the dark and safety of her own bed in her own tiny, shabby room. Ways she'd never indulged in public. Ways that would probably only make things...make the already unbearable and insatiable tingling...that much worse.

A hundred-thousand times worse.

"What are you, Hedy?"

"Wh...what?" The question surprised her. Startled her. Uncertain what she'd heard and even more uncertain what she'd been *supposed* to hear, Hedy shook her head.

She was in kind of a daze.

One from which it seemed there could...would...be no quick or simple recovery.

"More important, I think..." Saying this, Aaron put his hands on her shoulders. He cupped them in the large hands she'd noticed with such a thrill before...cupped them with a touch that burned straight through the thin and fluttery sleeves of the old Goodwill Store party dress she'd remodeled into her version of a dancing costume. A touch that somehow only managed to raise the tingling between

her legs to a newer, much higher level. A touch that left her reeling for the moment, breathless and stunned, her head so filled with strange clamoring and ringing that she was completely unable to hear the rest of what he said.

“What?” she tried again, realizing in the dimmest sort of way that she was beginning to sound nearly as dimwitted as Daddy always said she was. As unimaginative and dull in what he would sneeringly call a ‘*re-tard*’ way.

“I said I’d like to know how you plan to make up to me for trespassing on my property. What you plan to offer in payment for your use of said property.”

Said property?

Hedy didn’t know whether to laugh at how ridiculous and prim that sounded, or cry at how businesslike it almost managed to sound.

They’d reached the end of their argument about whose land this was. Her body told her they had...for now. But Aaron’s words were businesslike enough, in their slightly stilted way, to let her know the argument would come back again later. Quite possibly to bite them both. Even if the tone in which he said them, the warm delight of hands that kept holding and now began to caress as well, were anything but businesslike.

“I told you before.” Hedy’s voice tremored. Like the voice of a very, very old and weak woman seized in the throes of a terrible palsy. “This isn’t your land. It’s...”

“Miss Tillie’s.”

“Not Tillie. Tizzie!”

Aaron moved closer still. “You’re certainly putting me in one.”

“One...” *What?* Hedy managed to stop herself that time. Just in time.

“You’ve put me in a tizzy, Miss Hedy. One so bad that for the moment...” Aaron leaned closer still. He leaned so

perilously close that for the most astonishing of moments Hedy thought...

But he didn't.

And so, acting purely on reckless impulse of a moment escalated way beyond her control, Hedy tiptoed up to him. Lifting a knee, she spread her arms wide as if to take flight, and brushed her mouth against his. Brushed her mouth against lips that hesitated for an instant as if in shock. Lips that then, quickly, responded to her touch in a way she'd never even dared to dream.

CHAPTER THREE

Aaron heard himself say it, and couldn't quite force himself to believe.

Jesus. Where in the hell had *that* come from...all that crap about 'you've put me in a tizzy'?

He hadn't been able to help himself. In a moment of utter insanity, he supposed. But he sure as hell should be able to do something about helping himself now.

He should be able to *resist*.

And then she pressed her lips against his. Lips like honey. Peach-blossom honey that carried beneath their sweetness an intoxicating hint of the tart, ripe fruit that would inevitably be the result of such blossoming. She'd gone a mile or two farther than he'd ever expected.

For a magical creature born strictly in his imagination, she certainly did feel real. Solid, and warm, and not the least bit like a figment at all.

She was moving against him. Moving in ways he couldn't mistake for anything but the kind of open, thoroughly unabashed come-on he frankly despised in women who were after...always...nothing but their chance to get their hands on his money.

Except that this one wasn't a woman.

Strictly speaking.

Still sunk deep in the delusion she'd inspired, it was easy for Aaron to tell himself so. And easier still, almost

shockingly easy, to buy into the fantasy that no mortal, human woman could inspire such instant, uncompromising devotion in a heart deliberately hardened a long, long time ago. In a body long since inured to come-ons from some really accomplished women. Some really, goddamned determined and skilled ones.

This hesitant, experimental, almost shy strumming of the naiad Hedy's body, lovely as that body was, shouldn't have been nearly enough to cause such instant hardening upon first sight...such swollen hardening that hadn't left him for a fraction of a second since. Not even in the terrifying, potentially fatal moment when the nymph, naiad, woman...whatever the hell Hedy Chapin really was...discovered him with the engorged evidence right there between his hands.

If he hadn't known better, Aaron would have mistaken her for that most mythical and improbable creature of all...an old-fashioned virgin.

Of course *no* woman was a virgin in this day and age. That was just silly. Women today...every damned one of them...were out for one thing. To get all they could out of any man who'd stand still long enough to be gotten. And they all learned, at the age of about seven, that sex was the way to get it. The *primary* way, the one way guaranteed to work with any poor sucker they might decide to set their sights on.

Thinking about it that way made it so much easier for Aaron to rationalize what was happening to him right now. How the shimmering slip-and-slide of Hedy's body, breasts unrestricted and preternaturally soft beneath the gleaming, satiny sheen of her strangely tattered garment, excited him more in its persistently virginal way than had any of the expert moves of the much more accomplished strumpets he'd had in the past.

Aaron didn't believe he'd ever been so ready. So anxious. So just plain down-and-dirty in *need* of a woman. And not just any woman. This woman...naiad. *Only* this one.

Hedy kept up her slight, experimental strumming for barely a minute. Barely thirty seconds before, in the impossibly short interval when she stood away from him, his numbed and barely feeling hands still clenched uselessly, ridiculously, around her shoulders, he felt...

Bereft.

Bereft?

That was a novel feeling. Another way he wasn't used to feeling.

In the tiny interval that seemed to stretch on and on and *on*, into a future and an eternity that seemed to have no conceivable end, the time when Hedy stood gazing up at him in silence with inquisitive eyes, he felt powerless. To do anything to help himself. To say anything or make any move that might encourage her to come back and...put...him...out...of...his...misery.

Powerless.

To Aaron, accustomed to limitless power and the limitless exercise of that power, that was the most shocking development in an afternoon that so far had been just *lousy* with shocking developments. An afternoon he knew for certain was about to develop even more shockingly in moments to come.

He hadn't felt powerless at all...certainly not *this* powerless...since he was a kid, living in dirt-grubbing poverty under the self-righteous thumb of his old man. A sniveling, ineffectual preacher in a no-count, jerkwater country town at the back of nowhere, the old man had labored all his life for nothing. Under the truly ignorant and bizarre notion that to be deliberately, unabashedly poor as

dirt was holy. And to be powerless, divine.

Aaron had said ‘shit on that crap’ on his eighteenth birthday. And in the thirteen years since, he’d never gone back. Never called back, sent a letter back, never looked back. Not once. Because the past was just that. The past. Dead and gone, nothing that had ever happened there having any meaning to sane, thinking, intelligent people. Aaron had set the past firmly behind him and set about making up for lost time. Making up for the old man’s failures. He’d wasted no time at all figuring out that money was the key. That he needed to make money. All the money any one man could ever have.

Since then, since that long ago morning when he’d turned his back on everything he’d been forced to be and concentrated his full attention on what he *wanted* to be, he’d never allowed himself to feel powerless again.

Until now.

Until, waiting for Hedy to find an answer to her own question, the one she hadn’t asked but had only looked, he could do nothing but wait. Nothing but tremble all over, inside and out, and pray that answer would come soon.

It didn’t take long.

Thank the old man’s penny-pinching and unforgiving God, it didn’t take long at all.

Hedy made some small sound. Some indescribable one. And then she moved.

Her gaze remained as inquisitive as ever, faintly glassy-eyed and fascinated as she reached out, the swinging motion of her long and alabaster-gleaming arm so torturously slow, at least in Aaron’s perception, that he thought he heard the air rip with the force of its passage.

She reached out, reached for him.

Reached for that part of him that he’d managed to put away and out of her sight only by allowing the long hem of

his polo shirt to droop down, and over it. Her fingertips searched, quested, found. They touched firm knit fabric that yielded instantly, seeming to evaporate the instant it met her touch.

An electric jet flared through Aaron. And he jerked. Almost screamed when Hedy's fingers formed themselves into a shallow concavity. When she pressed that concavity hard up against his bulging, straining erection. Quite literally he did try to scream, the breath leaving his lungs in a single, momentarily collapsing and wholly inhuman whoosh.

She looked like she was about to say something. Her lips...full and lovely, perfectly shaped lips, as brilliant in the gray gloom of a rainy afternoon as a fire would be when it shone through the depth of darkest night...formed themselves into the unmistakable, more than vaguely unsettling beginning of a word. The shape of the letter 'w.' They puckered enticingly into that shape. Puckered promisingly. And his cock gave a good, hearty thump in response. A thump Hedy *had* to feel, though if she did she gave no kind of sign...no sudden widening of startled eyes, no gasp of astonished recognition, not even the instinctive pulling back that should and would have come if she'd been even half as virginally pure and innocent as she still, despite everything he'd learned and was still learning about her, appeared to be.

Instead she hummed. Softly, appreciatively.

Her fingers flexed. Adjusting themselves, the better to take him in and surround him with warmth that continued to shimmer and reverberate like a long series of electrical jolts generated deliberately and purposefully, to plunge him into the kind of complete submission in which she could do to him anything she wanted.

Whenever she wanted. In any way she wanted.

“Mmmmm,” she hummed again. Hummed louder.

Unexpectedly, Aaron’s knees folded.

Unexpectedly, he found himself kneeling again behind the screen of densely interwoven shrubbery that no longer served to shield him from her. Shrubby that closed snugly around the two of them now, closed intimately around them, swallowing the two of them up as if they’d never known any other existence, never lived at all in any world other than this one of deep-green privacy and shadowed secrets. This world of dripping gray silences broken, for the moment at least, only by the ragged rasp of Aaron’s breath struggling in and out, in and out, of a throat swollen too tight to allow ease of breathing or, sometimes, even the possibility of breathing.

Hedy was on her knees, too. Her tattered white dress puddled and spread, all ethereal and fluttering now despite the damp, across her thighs and around them. On the forest floor at the sides of them.

She was lower than on her knees...was folded forward over bare, tight-tucked knees, was leaning her face close to him. And he, in a condition of extreme extremity and terminal desperation, could only wait. For her to do something. To see what that something was going to be. What she was going to say.

At the moment that seemed to be nothing much at all.

The naiad...Hedy...seemed more curious than anything. And definitely interested.

That was kind of a relief, in light of the anger and outrage he’d expected following his ignominious discovery crouched and exposed in the bushes. It was really a relief, considering the first inklings of disgust he felt with himself for having let her catch him in the first place.

It wasn’t like him to slip up that way...to let his control or his guard down so shamelessly. But the fact was that

there must be something to her magic. Or maybe there was something seriously wrong with him. Something worrisomely wrong that needed to be put right before he got himself into real trouble that would wreak havoc on his life. Trouble that would...could so easily...wreck his reputation and bring to an end the power and the ability to wheel and deal that he so cherished. The power and ability that was so important...make that so *vital*...to his self-esteem and continued wellbeing.

The fact that he knelt here this way, unable to move a muscle to ease the suffering ache in flesh that had just about reached its limit...that had just about reached the point where it would have to be satisfied, completely and in the way it normally demanded to be satisfied, or explode...was just one more indication that there might be a problem here, Houston.

He was losing focus.

Seriously losing it. And he should get hold of himself. Should pull himself together.

Should.

Then she touched him.

With her mouth, Hedy touched him.

Aaron couldn't believe what she did to him.

Leaning forward over knees folded demurely beneath her, leaning forward over small hands folded just as demurely atop those knees, she brushed the full and ripe, lush curves of her lips against him. Lips that proved every bit as fiery as the floating, flaming cloud of her hair whenever it touched him.

Hedy brushed her lips cautiously along the side of him. First one side, and then the other. As if she wasn't quite sure what she was doing and needed to feel her way. Needed to experiment with...

Finished with the sides, she decided, either through

some stroke of extraordinarily good luck or some kind of infallible inborn instinct, to devote her attentions to the rest of him. Or more specifically, to the underside of the rest of him. Aaron wasn't quite sure how she managed it. How she got the angle she did. All that mattered was that she did get it. Somehow, maybe by bending lower still and leaning closer, or maybe it was in the way she tilted her magnificent head, turning it to the side so that her hair became a ruby-tinted waterfall obscuring her face and her enticing bare shoulder, she did manage.

Aaron thought he had to scream when the soft drag of those lips, parted a little now to include just the smallest hint of tongue, meandered slowly along the most sensitive part of his most sensitive part. When she found the tiny ridge of skin just below the head and gave it a quick, merciless flick with her tongue.

There was no reason why he couldn't scream. None he could think of.

No one was in these deep, forgotten woods. No one but Aaron and his naiad Hedy. And a few ghosts of those bothersome old-time Petty rabble-rousers and seditionists too, he supposed. Though he certainly wasn't going to worry about disturbing the ghosts. Because when push came right down to shove, he really didn't believe in ghosts.

Any more than he believed in naiads?

The thought made him shudder. The notion that Hedy might, in all reality very well could, be some kind of inexplicable otherworldly being, made him quake. The thought that she might not be any more real than the ghosts, and the thought that if one was this real, then the other surely must be, started up a strange, almost anticipatory shivering inside him. Above all the thought that all those other thoughts were going to require some major shifts in

his way of thinking left him...terrified. If terror was even an option at that moment.

But wait.

Hedy had gone on and on about that woman. Miss Tizzie. Some goddamned old codger of a woman who claimed she owned the land he'd bought from someone else, from its rightful and legitimate owner. Some old girl who'd no doubt gotten so dotty in her decrepitude that she didn't have a clue what she really did own.

That, he guessed, was what he was really afraid of. Why he was really afraid to let himself scream out his agony and his pleasure. He was afraid, was terrified halfway out of his ever-loving mind that the sound of screams in the middle of the woods on a gray and mist-choked day might attract the attention of the old bat, if there really was an old bat. And that she'd come cruising on out here to investigate.

He'd be in hot water then. For sure. If anybody...cop or old bat or very possible rabble-rousing, seditious Petty ghost...found him like this, found him here with his pants around his knees and this sultry redheaded whatever-she-was just about to service him...

"Jesus Christ!" The words came out thick and shattered. Like he'd been fatally wounded in some kind of dire accident, and was trying to utter his last few words before closing his eyes for the last time.

The woman...

His cock...

"Oh, Jesus Christ, Hedy..."

He was in her *mouth*. Was surrounded by the deep and sultry heat of it. Was enclosed by that heat. By endless, intoxicating, steaming and scintillating essence that fit tightly around him. That dragged twice as maddeningly as any fingertips she'd ever used upon him when she moved her head.

Without warning he found himself submerged in her. Taken in. Absorbed. Almost completely *devoured* by a voracious hunger that only served to cancel out the strangely erotic innocence of her first, preliminary stroking with barely parted lips.

Aaron felt glad suddenly, felt eternally grateful, he *was* on his knees. Was clutching tight to any number and all manner of leaves, and branches, and twigs in order to remain as upright as he still was.

He'd never have been able to stand against this kind of onslaught. Even now, he wanted to give in, let go, surrender. Let go of all that wet vegetation and fall helpless to his back in the midst of it. Wanted to wrap his fingers around the small head beneath the magnificent waterfall of hair that in its fiery essence seemed so contradictory to his image of her...his fantasy that she was somehow, inextricably, connected with the water.

He wanted to twist burning strands around his fingers. Wanted to brush at them, and shove the silken torture of their floating, flaming tendrils away from his thighs. Away from overburdened and overexcited flesh that quaked and quailed in the face of that torture. A cock that dreaded having to feel more, yet at the same time realized it couldn't survive without more incredible, flaming and scarring fire. Without more...so very much more...of the lushly succulent moisture of her all-encompassing mouth. Moisture that did nothing whatsoever to quench the fire she ignited.

Wanted to. But couldn't. Because he no longer had any power to move. Not even to save himself.

The naiad had used the very strongest of her magic upon him.

She had turned him to stone. Living, hurting stone.
With a single touch.

CHAPTER FOUR

He was delicious. Hedy had no idea what possessed her. Why she had taken it into her head to touch him in the first place. Especially to touch him the way she had, with lips and mouth that had suddenly grown greedy upon their first, brushing exploration. With a mouth that seemed, all on its own and without consent from anybody, to know how to do any number of things she'd never read about in her books or seen in the movies she loved to watch...romantic movies, impossible movies. Things she'd most of all never imagined she could or would do.

Fascinated to start with, curious and delighted by the unexpected chance to satisfy some of that curiosity, she'd simply acted. Without really thinking. But to be so forward...to act so much like the shameless harlot Daddy and the uncles always predicted she would turn out to be, or sometimes said she'd already become?

Hedy's face flamed hot. Almost hot enough to melt the crystalline dew from the dream-trees that sheltered her secret dancing pool. Hot enough to turn the sparkling spray of her fountain to shimmering steam. To dry it up forever and take away the special place she'd made, with Miss Tizzie's help, for herself. This one place where she felt as close to certain as she could get that Daddy or his brothers would never dare come. Because Miss Tizzie had a gun. A

great big double-barreled shotgun that had belonged to *her* Daddy. And she wasn't afraid to use it. Had already used it a couple of times, taking potshots at one or the other of them as they'd been up to some kind of no good on her property. Shouting at them from her back door that she wouldn't tolerate 'varmints' on her property. *Any* kind of varmints.

Hedy herself had heard Daddy say the 'old witch' was crazy. And they'd all, including Hedy and especially Hedy, better steer way clear of her. If they knew what was good for them.

Hedy wasn't that much afraid of discovery, though there was always the possibility Daddy would recant or one of the uncles would slip up. She was in truth more afraid of what she'd done. What she was doing. The *outcome* of what she was doing.

She'd known men got hard when they got aroused.

Ignorant she might be for her age, thanks to the lack of female influences in her life combined with her own embarrassment, Daddy's hot temper, and the uncles' cantankerous reputation. But she wasn't *that* ignorant.

Still, it had come as something of a surprise to discover just how hard, and how *large*. It was still surprising as she made more and more unexpected discoveries. First, that the rigid piece of flesh she'd taken so unthinkingly if enthusiastically into her mouth, as if it was something she did every day of the week, was hot. Supremely hot, and pulsing with life...with the soft thunder of blood that gave it its unique, almost separate existence.

It...she wasn't sure what to call it, how to think of it, was too embarrassed to think of it even in the privacy of her own mind as a penis, so 'it' would have to do...moved. Astonishingly, moved and seemed to search in some way. For what, she didn't know. Though she thought she

suspected.

Aaron had been still as a statue for quite a while. He'd been as marble-still, except for his 'it', as the statue Miss Tizzie hadn't had installed at the center of Hedy's fountain. But now there was movement.

With a low and anguished 'Jesus Christ' that made Hedy cringe, since for all Daddy's faults and shortcomings, taking the Lord's name in vain was one he would absolutely not tolerate, Aaron began to tremble. Violently.

His hands came up at last. Surrounding himself, they held himself steady. They cupped the great and sagging sac that hung behind 'it'. Massaging it. Supporting it as if the aching weight of it was too incredible to be suffered. And he groaned again, too. Something unintelligible this time, though Hedy felt fairly certain there were meant to be words, meant to be meaning, in there somewhere.

In response she pressed her lips tighter together. Pressed them around their long and rigid, still-swelling captive in a way she'd already decided Aaron liked very, exceedingly much. Experimentally she moved forward. Slipped forward. Trailing her tongue idly along the part of him that seemed to be the most sensitive. The part on the underneath side where the tiniest bit of skin, scarcely more than a tissue-thin membrane, ridged the otherwise smoothly rounded surface below the head of the long and glistening shaft.

As a reward she received a groan this time. A definite groan. No words now, just that low and strangled sound, thick in Aaron's throat, that she couldn't interpret because she'd never heard anything quite like it before. And with the groan came more movement from 'it'. A struggling *surge* of movement as his shaft came alive. As it...Aaron...thrust forward, shoving the length of himself all the way into her surprised and surprisingly

accommodating mouth.

Hedy gagged a little at the depth of the thrust. She tried to withdraw, tried to ease the sudden, filling heat that was so much larger than she'd expected or realized. The heat that tried to choke her with its impatience.

Retreat, however, was impossible.

Aaron made it impossible. One of his hands abandoned the swollen weight it had supported and lifted to the back of her head. It wasn't a hard touch, more like the gentlest of caresses. But still it was irresistible. Still it was firm and sure, holding her there. Holding her inescapably where she was, and how she was.

"Suck me," he whispered and the sound of his voice, the thick and hard grate of it, seemed to slice a terrible gash through the green and gray slumbering gloom that protected them.

Hedy tried to answer. But held as she was, her mouth filled to its limit as it was, she could only gargle something. A plea for mercy, maybe. Something he shouldn't be able to understand, but quite possibly did anyway.

"Suck me," he ordered, his grip tightening upon her head, his fingers insinuating themselves deep amongst the roots of her hair to exert bruising, almost brutal pressure on her scalp beneath.

Hedy had no choice.

Tears coursing down her cheeks, suddenly afraid as she witlessly hadn't thought to be afraid before, she couldn't speak. Couldn't protest.

Could only do as he ordered.

Tightening her mouth even more, tightening it around the impossibly, even alarmingly thick base of the hot and hungry, choking shaft, she did as she'd been told. She sucked. Hesitantly at first. Uncertainly.

"Harder." Aaron's hands pressed harder. Pulled her

closer, even as he rammed the enormity of his flesh deeper still. As he rammed it all the way against the back of her throat.

She tried again. Her hands unclasped themselves from themselves and hurried upward, to clutch at Aaron's hips with full desperation. But whether she meant to hold tight or to shove him away with every bit of strength remaining to her, she couldn't say. She could only, again, do as he ordered her to do.

"Suck hard," he demanded, even as she did.

And then "harder" when she did.

Gasping, sobbing as much as the intruding obstruction would permit, Hedy tightened her mouth yet again, and drew on him savagely. Drew on him and drew on him, even when further drawing seemed impossible.

"That's it." Inside her mouth, the length of him moved when he spoke. It moved approvingly, she thought, though of course she had no rational basis for that belief. No more rational basis than she'd had for any of her other, earlier beliefs and suppositions about men. "You like it. I can tell."

In reply, Hedy whimpered.

And Aaron's hands twisted deeper into her hair. Twisted almost cruelly. "Answer when you're spoken to, Hedy."

She tried. Still unable to form words or other coherent and meaningful sounds, still sucking hard at what he'd given her to suck, sucking because she *wanted* to do this and not just because she was being virtually forced, she gave a small grunt that was meant to mean 'yes'. If it didn't mean 'no.' Meant, she thought almost for certain, to be wholehearted agreement and a heartfelt 'anything you want.'

It wasn't a very satisfying attempt. But apparently it was enough to satisfy Aaron.

He said no more. Or maybe now he, too, found speech

impossible...all hope of speech impossible.

He'd turned delicious to her taste. Delightful to her touch. Delicious in the most curious, decidedly unbalancing way that shot another tingling out from the place where she'd joined herself with him. A tingling that began with lips and tongue used in never before imagined ways. A tingling that bounced around and around inside her. Never stopping and never pausing, until that tingling came to rest finally in the most likely of places. In the damp and quivering place between her legs. The secret female place where nothing exactly like this, nothing so deadly potent or blatantly overpowering had *ever* come to rest before.

Shuddering as a burst of shimmering, simultaneously chilling and lava-hot moisture quivered from that selfsame secret female flesh, Hedy applied herself to Aaron anew. Using her tongue now, she worked hard, even struggling at times to urge it into positions from which she could flick repeatedly with its very tip. Flick teasingly. Flick maddeningly. Tauntingly.

It worked.

Her strategy worked.

Aaron...somehow, she'd begun to think of him as *her* man, though of course that was ridiculous, that was just impossible...groaned. Not in any way he'd done before. This was a low and quavering groan, one that came from the depths of his heart to murmur in mist-laden air then vanish almost immediately, doomed to dripping oblivion even before it was uttered.

Hedy felt like laughing.

She couldn't, of course.

Her mouth was still full.

Still in full possession of the searing, succulent length with which she knew he meant to dominate her, subdue her, and quite...very...probably humiliate her.

But that worked both ways. All of those things had two very different, completely separate sides. In a single moment, in a flash of insight almost blinding in its intensity, Hedy realized the situation had somehow reversed. At some time while she hadn't been capable of looking or seeing, control had passed subtly but unmistakably from Aaron to her.

His hands dropped away from her. Lingering for a moment along the strands of her hair, they seemed reluctant to drop. But drop they did. They were...he was...helpless to do anything else. That same bizarre, almost unnerving insight told her so.

Hedy continued her work upon him. She sucked hard, no longer under his domination or his direction, playing the tip of her tongue along his length to make him suffer the way his continued groans told her he already suffered aplenty. And he went limp.

His body went limp, but not the thrusting, vigorous shaft. His arms dropped to his sides as if they had no life left, and every part of him except the stuttering, searing length that steamed gently when she released it from her mouth seemed to sink into some kind of odd, perhaps permanent oblivion of motionlessness. Rigidly upright, independent now of her and untouched by her, his shaft steamed in the cool and only marginally dryer air surrounding it. Steamed and seemed, by comparison to all the rest of him, to have grown even larger. Enormously larger. And much, much harder. Though Hedy felt certain that had to be impossible.

Crying out in a small and stark animal sound of abject agony, Aaron fell away from her. He collapsed amid shreds and shards and strangling runners of greenery that surged up immediately around him as he dropped to his back, seeming to swallow him alive.

His hands scrabbled. Weakly scrabbled, desperately seeking to find the place where she'd induced such suffering. And once they found, they sought to massage. To ease, when they were clearly incapable of any kind of coherent, useful action.

He groaned again. In the same heartfelt way that expressed so clearly his capitulation to something, some force, infinitely and terrifyingly more potent than any he could hope to exert.

Hungry now, as greedily in need of him as she'd been terrified of him only a moment or two before, Hedy leapt upon him. She'd been seized by...something. She couldn't explain it even to herself. She had no experience with anything like it, therefore no knowledge of anything like it.

Passion, perhaps.

She thought this must be what the characters in the soap operas referred to as 'passion' on those rare and infrequent occasions when Daddy was absent or otherwise indisposed and she had a chance to sneak a look at one or another of them.

Whatever it was, it was certainly electrifying. It had taken her over so that she could scarcely see, scarcely think, and could not reason at all.

"God *damn!*" Aaron shouted, and this time the profanity didn't bother her.

She guessed she no longer minded because she had other things on her mind. So many other things, all kinds of things.

Falling upon Aaron, her hands finding the glorious and straight, creamy-hued column of his shaft, she cradled it between palms that ached...quite literally *ached*...to feel the silken pulse jolting deep beneath translucently pale, blue-veined skin. Somewhere down near the heart and center of him. She ached to feel the astonishing heat he

radiated, too...felt like someone too long denied every form of heat, every form of life-giving sustenance, someone worried that even if heat and sustenance should be returned to her, it would be too late. She might be too frozen and starved, too far gone, to partake even when she needed so desperately to partake.

She ran his shaft gently between hands she folded into an attitude strangely reminiscent of holy prayer. Hands she held flat and palm to palm, barely far enough apart to allow the enlarged girth of him to pass between, Hands that exerted no small amount of the snug drag that seemed always to aggravate him and weaken him.

Hedy stroked him...did more than simply stroke him.

She caused him to jump spasmodically. To lengthen again, hardening even more and straining ever more in response to her caresses. Caused the rounded, finely molded tip of him to seek earnestly in the midst of all those thrashings, desperate for what it badly wanted, yet could never seem to find.

Sighing, Aaron closed his eyes. Shuddering deeply, with the lowest moan yet, he gave up all effort to use his hands or even to control them. He let them simply drift where they wanted to go...back to his sides. Let his long and gleaming fingers become enmeshed, much as they'd earlier been in her hair, in his billowing bed of shrubbery.

Pulling at the leaves and vines in his grasp, Aaron tugged at them. He tugged hard, exhaling a long, whistling, shudder of sheer anguish.

"Shit," he breathed as she moved her hands slowly over him. And then "Hedy!" when she picked up their speed a little. Just as an experiment. Only an experiment.

In reply, Hedy laughed.

Her feeling of power was immense. So immense she had no words to express it, or ability to explain it.

The power simply *was*.

Simply was delightful.

When she'd first spotted him, not in the initial, queasy instant when she'd become aware through some odd pricking of instinct and sixth sense that someone lurked in the bushes behind her, but later, when she'd ripped the interlaced branches apart to reveal him, she'd thought he was a 'college boy.' The kind who came down to the beach as regular as the tides on sunny summer or autumn weekends in their red, or black, or silver convertibles. The kind of boys...men...whose lovely, almost universally fair hair blew back in the breeze of their travel, who wore tan pants pressed to a crease so sharp that Myra down at the Seashore Deli could use them to fine-shave the ham Hedy bought every Sunday morning for Daddy's evening sandwich.

College boys. Some of them older. Some no longer in school, but working in brokerage houses or investment firms or even in junior levels of government over in Washington. Laughing men-boys in tan pants and the brightly colored pullover shirts they seemed required to wear with them. Men-boys who never stopped in all their glamorous, languorous pursuits to notice a starry-eyed little local nobody like Hedy Chapin. Who never took the time even to give her a passing glance. Because on her battered old bicycle with the faded plastic basket trimmed with drooping pink flowers she'd bought at the Dollar Isle, she was so very obviously not one of them. Not of their class at all.

Yet somehow, here she was.

Through some inconceivable accident of fate she'd caught one of them. At least for this little while.

Aaron was one of them.

He was a 'college boy.'

He was at her mercy.

And she meant to exercise to the maximum the power she'd so stunningly, inexplicably gained over him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Aaron figured he'd give Hedy her moment. It was a technique that had worked well in the past. He'd give up a little, give up the very bare minimum he'd be required to give in order to get the results he wanted. Then he'd reap his rewards. And come out, as always, the unqualified winner.

For a little while, things had been proceeding right on schedule. He'd given his little bit, got Hedy relaxed, then given himself a minute or two for similar relaxation. In preparation. For the taking. Of whatever he wanted, whatever he decided was his due. And that was where...when...he'd made his mistake. That was where and when things had gone wrong. Big time wrong, just like that. Just that quick.

He'd lost control. A thing he wasn't much used to doing, any more than he was used to a hell of a lot of things he'd done this afternoon. One more thing he didn't *like* doing. But this onslaught...these hands and this mouth, seeking him out, seeking everything he had, more than he'd ever planned to give up to anyone...

Scents rose up around him. Basic scents. Very, disturbingly sensual and earthy scents. Natural ones, teeming with life in all its visceral implications. All its vital implications. Scents that aroused powerfully. As no scent encountered before had ever aroused.

With their very earthiness they aroused, these scents of rain misting through thick-laced trees, of mist lying on fresh leaves and spicy bark. Rain kissing distant grass and the cool and fresh, invigorating sweetness of the falling rain itself.

And other scents.

Aromas of wet earth, fecund and rich.

The perfume of crushed foliage, dominant and overriding among all other scents in a world gone wild and crazy, and all upside down. Foliage he'd crushed himself, with hands that grappled ineffectually, hands that weakened and lost even the most primitive ability to grapple as Hedy returned, more ferocious in her new attack than she'd been in earlier ones.

She came at him with those lips again.

Sinful lips.

Delicious lips, doing all manner of delicious things.

Lips that parted in the instant they reached his tip...lips that parted quite accommodatingly to embrace flesh that had never ached with such pain before. Deep-down pain that sprang right from the center of his tortured, tormented soul.

She was a greedy little witch with those lips. She was as demanding as he'd ever been, and just about as single-mindedly selfish in the pursuit of what she wanted. All for herself.

Her lips parted. Mist soft, ruby rich, they slipped over him. Along him. Slipped the full, screaming length of him in half the time it took to suck in one long and harsh, rasping breath. So he could emit a genuine, for-real and audible scream.

Hedy's mouth was a living cauldron. A scorching and steaming, innately destructive force of nature that had surrounded him, subdued him, was just about to conquer

him and lay ruin to him.

Barely able to breathe, Aaron thought it might be all right to submit to a little destruction for a change. Just a little, and only just for a little while. Because eventually, before very much time passed, he was going to have to find a way to be in complete control again. To get things back on track, and get what *he* wanted.

In the meantime, though...

She could have her little fling.

He could let her have that much. No sweat.

And then he'd have his own.

Or so he'd thought. At first it was interesting to lie still for a stretch of time, at leisure and required to do nothing but enjoy what Hedy seemed to give so freely. With such little guile and so few underlying motives of her own.

But somewhere along the way, everything had changed. At just about the instant she shimmered her way down to the base of him, taking her own devilishly sweet time about getting there.

For the longest of times, an eternity of time, she seemed barely to move...seemed as frozen into immobility as he'd been almost from the beginning. Because it was hard...make that impossible...to be anything other than frozen and helpless with his nervous system under such attack. When it was being so overloaded and so bombarded by sensation upon wave of debilitating, demoralizing sensation. Sensation that quivered first upon the surface of him, sparking and sparkling against his skin. Sensation that then sank in, to quiver just as unnervingly through the hardened meat of the flesh beneath. Sensation that tried to, that damned near succeeded in, turning his hardness to ruined nothing long before he was ready to be reduced to ruin.

"Christ," he groaned. Finding enough strength in his

forgotten hands, he managed to lift them. Managed to catch hold of Hedy's head, now altogether invisible beneath the floating and tumbled cloud of her scarlet, vermillion, crimson illuminated hair. He found enough strength to press his hands deep into her hair, using its soft but clinging, fragile but immutable strength to aid his own. To keep his hands from dropping like the lifeless rubber they so terribly resembled, back to his sides. Where he'd never...*never*...manage to use them again.

He was able to find her, able to touch her, able to cling to the on-fire waterfall of her hair as it tumbled and frothed across his bare thighs. But that was it. That was all. Once he'd done all of that...and it was a massive effort, requiring a major struggle...he had no strength left over. No substance remaining at all with which to control her or direct her movements as he'd planned.

Trapped in gleaming ruby strands that seemed to gain perverse, even diabolical, life and strength of their own as they clung to his fingers and wrists, strands that seemed to feed off his weakness in order to gain ever more, ever more startling ability to ensnare him, his hands could only go along for the ride.

And a scalding ride it turned out to be.

Hedy knelt now. Straddling him. The fluttering tatters of the torn ruin of her old-fashioned, once lovely party dress floated in endless clouds of points and scallops around the two of them. They concealed the molten center of her from him in spite of their apparent translucent fragility. But Aaron could *feel* her quite distinctly. Where she pressed herself down. Somewhere in the vicinity of knees that had long ago given up their strength and turned to water.

He could feel the heat of her...tight heat, muscular heat from the long hours she must have spent dancing unobserved and alone in her naiad's fountain...heat that

seared too much sensation into the patch of flesh, the part of his thigh, she touched as she bent over him. As she bent forward, her mouth greedier and more demanding than ever, taking in the full length of him and working upon that length her utterly singular, fantastically startling magic.

She swayed her hips.

Gently. Side to side and back and forth in nearly circular motions that managed, in some inexplicable way, to be hypnotic and even a little monotonous at the same time that they became the most wildly, uncontrollably exciting form of movement any man had ever been called upon to witness. Much less endure.

With every sway, she brushed the seething center of her flesh against him.

With every brush, the touch of that seething flesh burned hotter still.

And with every burning, she moistened. More. Against him.

It was with a great shock, almost a heart-stopping one, that Aaron realized she wore nothing beneath her strange, strangely attractive fountain spirit's debutante dress. Not even the tiniest scrap of cloth to cover and conceal the sinfully delicious flesh he'd used to...not so long ago...think of as merely another cunt. Like all the other cunts he'd had or would ever have. Just one more in a long and indistinguishable line of cunts upon cunts upon cunts.

But that was a word he would never, could never, apply to Hedy. Because she *was* distinguishable from any other. She was deliciously mystical, deliriously otherworldly and yet, at heart, dreamily earthy in her own right. Earthy and wet. Not with water from her fountain, or the swirls of drizzle-laden mist that thickened noticeably, growing heavier around them.

Hedy was as wet as the mist, as wet as the rain and the

drizzle, but in a different way. She was wet with what, in his cynical way, he'd always reduced to its basest form by thinking of it as cum...a word that fit her, fit the shimmer of mist pouring from her body no better and no more appropriately than the ribald name he would never use to describe her ripe, luscious flesh.

The word that seemed to apply to Hedy in every respect, the one that applied most perfectly to what was going on within her right now was once again...*magic*!

Or maybe the word should be essence. The essence of the magic. The essence of the sweet-flowing fountain. All of it was the essence of her. Of Hedy...the naiad part of Hedy that Aaron was still half-convinced must be the reality of her.

Dark and musky, as spectacularly fecund and virile as the earth upon which she knelt and he lay, the scent of Hedy's naiad essence drifted to him. Engulfing him, overpowering in the very faintness that made it seem the most potent scent he'd ever inhaled, her perfume incapacitated him with the same subtlety that made it...the barely perceived trace of it...so very, so infinitely desirable. And addictive. Even without the branding brush of flesh that rubbed and brushed unabashedly against the tip of him now. Even without the darkness inherent in the unseen inner layers of flesh that scorched his own. That left him more parched than before, more parched than ever, for the relief of her. Fevered for the satisfaction that was her.

"Christ," Aaron murmured it this time. A single word, meant not for anyone to hear or respond to, but solely for his own benefit. Solely as something, some tangible human concept he could seize upon in the rapidly diminishing hope he might retain his sanity. Or some small part of it. But somehow, only inevitably, it didn't work. None of it worked...not his manic clutching at grass, and tendrils of

hair and anything else that happened to fall within his reach. Not his frantic attempts to relax and control the hitching, galloping rate of his breathing. And certainly not this latest, lamest, attempt to ease anguish and find stability by talking to himself!

Hedy's lips quivered around him.

There was no way to know if the quivering was intentional, or if it was purely an involuntary thing. Purely a reaction to some attack of nerves, or maybe mounting passion, on her part.

Either way, it didn't matter. Because the result was the same. Was dynamic, expertly wielded, expertly deadly.

Those quiverings of her lips...quiverings which only went on and on and on...transmitted themselves stealthily, surreptitiously, unstopably into his cock. Stressing to its limit what was stressed already. What had grown desperate, had become way too susceptible to precisely this kind of stress.

Aaron cried out.

He couldn't help himself.

The cry just slipped out. Quite low, and quite expressive of the incredible turmoil a slight thing like that quiver in Hedy's lips...*such* a slight thing...could inspire. The cry slipped between his own lips that had fallen slack. Lips that hung every bit as quivering as his cock or the mouth that surrounded it. And his cry hung there. In air that suddenly seemed sheer and ringing, like perfect crystal. Somehow. In spite of the massing and thickening fog. Air that seemed in some magical way to magnify every sound. Every drip and droplet of falling water. Air that seemed to amplify those sounds and combine them, into a kind of symphony that in its own inexplicable way soon became more musical and far more magnificent than any he'd heard at Carnegie Hall.

The quivering of Hedy's lips went all the way into him.

All the way through him. It sent heated warning darts down into balls she cupped in cool, small hands, balls she lifted a little. Gauging their readiness, no doubt. Seeing if they'd filled enough to meet her greed.

Aaron didn't want to be ready. Not yet.

He wanted, with an agonizing twisting sort of want, to keep this going for as long as he could. Wanted to feel the soothing delight of those hands, murmuring against flesh that would not allow itself to be soothed or consoled, for the rest of his life. If the rest of his life was even going to be possible.

Hedy ran her mouth along him in what some inner sense insisted was to be one last, killing stroke. No longer surrounding him, no longer taking him in, she'd compressed her lips again. Compressed them firmly, as if they'd never opened wide or eagerly to accept him. And then she ran them, pressed so tightly together, down the side of him in a kind of farewell gesture that set his heart to jerking hard. Jerking with cold regret. She ran her lips along the underside, brushing infinite trails of fiery torture along the sensitive strip of flesh that could never, would never, have what it desired again. Would never know the inner, ravishing heat of her splendid mouth again. She paused once, near his tip. Paused long enough at that most agonizingly sensitive bit of skin to flick with the tip of her tongue. To flick once. Twice. Three luminescent times.

Making him want to scream for real.

Making him struggle to imagine, through the rising fog of fever that clouded his brain and rendered all attempts at reason or logical thought impossible, how the tip of that maddening, strumming tongue must look. How intoxicatingly pink it must be as it made its demon-driven way so lightly across him. As it aroused within him such thunderous response. Aaron dreamed how the tip of that

torturing tongue would look, how even the smallest glimpse of it would excite with delicious rosinness...how it would cause all manner of insidious hardenings and internal twisting as it stroked, harmlessly enough for everything except his heart, and his cock, and his whole self, across the passion-swollen pads of her lips.

And he jerked. All of him did. Arms, legs, everything, as a stiffening vapor seemed to lock up somewhere inside him. Preventing any of the expected, inevitable for a man in his dire condition, things from happening.

“Oh, God!”

This time his cry was one of utter anguish. And upon its utterance, Hedy sat up straight.

She pressed the moist center of herself down again. Pressed it hard atop his knees. Hard enough, maybe, to shatter them if they hadn’t already long since vaporized into nothing. She touched him, and gave him a questioning look.

Her head tilted a little. Just enough that a sprinkling of ruby-diamond iridescence that was her hair dropped across a pale shoulder. Just enough that the ends of that iridescence reached for him, as greedy-ravenous as the female flesh that seemed virtually to *pulse* against his thigh. So that the ends of that luminescence settled around him. So that they stroked it with a silk he hadn’t known before. A silk whose touch burned into him a billion maddening points of light, And scintillation. And utter chaos.

A billion tingles that left him waiting. Wondering what was going to happen. Knowing it was going to happen, and unable to bear not knowing *when* it was going to happen.

Hedy sat upon him.

For an eternity of eternities, while mist-shrouded woods dripped silkily around them. While the drizzle stopped. While it muted and mutated even more into the spiraling of

fog that continued to solidify. And to thicken, mingling with the soft steam that emanated from their nowhere near joined bodies.

Mist, graying and swirling, that thickened more still in the short yet interminable moment while they stared into each others' eyes. Mist that seemed to know much more than Aaron about what was likely to happen very, very soon now. Mist that seemed to expect it and to ready itself, ready the now-silent and shrouded world around them in that expectation.

"What?" Aaron asked when she continued to look down at him in that slightly quizzical, utterly maddening and demoralizing way...when he decided he could stand no more.

"I was just thinking." The full curves of her lips pressed together again. As if she was completely unaware he'd asked a question. As if she was just as unaware of the effect she was having upon him.

And just like that, just that easily and with no attempt at struggle or resistance at all, he wanted her.

He wanted Hedy

With a fever and an intensity that approached and then very quickly surpassed the stark, raw craving of a hopeless junkie.

CHAPTER SIX

She felt weak-kneed when she staggered to her feet. Far too unsteady to *stay* on her feet, she feared. Though she did manage through some small miracle or another.

The area between her legs throbbed. Burned. Stung, with an aching intensity that just naturally had one of her hands grappling with the hem of her dancing dress. Had it struggling to pull the lovely, floating points of it up and aside so that her other hand could find its way beneath. To territories where she'd done some exploring in the past. Territories she'd stroked in the dead of cold seaside nights, stroked ardently and diligently when blusters of wind crept through the thin walls of her tiny room in what her father fondly imagined to be a house. Stroked in the beginning because she'd found the stroking warming. Soothing. And then later stroked because she'd found the stroking gratifying. Found it soothed the vague and nameless longings that seized her. For things she didn't know how to name because she didn't know them at all. Things she would most likely never know if Daddy and his reputation had anything to say about it.

But all of that, all the pleasant, self-induced satisfaction of the cold and dark, frozen winter nights was nothing compared to this.

Nothing.

Aaron shuddered when she touched herself.

Hedy saw the rippling, resounding force of his shudder in his shoulders and body, and felt the same force of it echo inside herself as *her* body responded. First to the deeper probing and manipulations as her fingertips slipped deeper than they'd ever slipped before, past the exquisitely tender and awakened outer folds of her flesh. Slipped deeper and ever deeper, in search of the most secret pleasures waiting to be discovered and kindled beneath. And then she responded to his response. Shuddering with him in time as she felt a new strangeness emanate from him. Shuddering almost as if she was *inside* him, was feeling everything he felt...as she discovered a new certainty inside herself. That whatever was happening within him, it was sure to have enormous, far-reaching impact upon her as well.

"Christ in heaven." Aaron's voice sounded strained. Ready to break into a million and one sparkling-jagged little pieces. And maybe that was why Hedy no longer minded his language. Or maybe, reaching deeper and ever deeper inside herself for the lovely satisfaction she'd believed for so long had to be 'dirty' or 'whorin' because it was female and it was pleasurable, she'd decided Daddy was a hypocrite. The worst kind of hypocrite. And the uncles, too. Maybe she'd decided their judgment on such things...on everything...had to be just a little suspect. And very unreliable.

"Hedy, you have to..." Aaron had struggled and failed a couple of times. But he'd managed to drag himself to his feet at last. He was unsteady on them...massively unsteady, swaying and staggering like a man fighting gale-force nor'easters, when there was no nor'easter at all...not even the slightest hint of breeze at the moment to stir air that hung utterly thick and completely silent, like the heaviest curtains all around them.

They might be the last two people alive. In a world long

since succumbed to some sort of mysterious, life-ending tragedy.

Hedy never abandoned herself. Now that the familiar heat of pleasure had begun deep inside, she continued to stroke. Softly, with the one hand, the two fingertips, that had instigated it. But with the other hand she caught hold of Aaron's wrist.

It was the first time they'd touched in anything resembling a normal way. A non-intimate, non-inflammatory one. And yet, considering all the other things that were going on inside both of them, it was a touch that crackled with sexuality. Crackled like wildfire let loose through every fiber and cell of her. Searing, numbing wildfire with the power to end her life. To crisp her heart to a cinder, to make it miss beats and then seize solid in denial of any and all future beats. Wildfire that must change everything, permanently, if she didn't break contact. Now. Immediately.

The man was dangerous.

Dangerously potent.

But just like a victim of incinerating electrical shock, she couldn't let go of him. Her fingers had seized tight. They'd forever contracted around the endless stimulus of his wrist. What was worse, what was more startling and twice as incinerating, she didn't want to let go. Had no intention of letting go until...well, she wasn't sure. When she'd started, moving with some difficulty since she'd been so loathe to release her hold upon herself either, she'd had no real idea what she meant in grabbing his wrist. Where she meant to go with him, or what she meant to do once she got there.

But now that changed. In barely a second of contact, all of that made itself crystal clear.

The fountain.

It was the most special place she knew. There could be no place else.

It had to be the fountain. Her fountain. The one from which her every secret joy sprang...her freedom to be who she was. What she was. Her freedom to dream and make her plans that she hoped someday would see her realizing every one of those dreams.

The fountain was the source, the embodiment, of everything she was.

It was only natural that she should take him there. To make him as much a part of her as any man could ever be a part. Releasing her grip upon herself at last, she ran...*ran*, anticipating she knew not what, exactly, but anticipating just the same.

Running, her fingers locked unshakably around Aaron's wrist, running with him close behind and making no protest, Hedy splashed into her magic circle.

Dancing, lilting water scattered before her, before them. As always when she broke through the sparkling barrier to reach the inner security it held so perfectly, a thousand...million...droplets of it flung in every direction. A great many of them sparked onto her hair, her clothes, her skin. And onto Aaron's. Sparked and sizzled, cooling and yet not cooling as the heat of which she'd been possessed did nothing to evaporate them and everything to superheat them into stinging, savage reminders of themselves.

A little less sure-footed, Aaron stumbled behind her. Stumbled on the low marble sill that held the jets close to the ground. And then he slid a little, slipping and skating, across the flat and gleaming slab upon which the droplets fell, never reaching the raised pedestal that had become her stage.

And then they reached that stage. The pedestal. The one

originally meant to hold the larger-than-life sized statue of a pair of lovers intertwined in the most intimate way possible. The statue that now stood elsewhere, in another secret and secluded corner of Miss Tizzie's garden, closer to the house, where Miss Tizzie herself could, and no doubt did, enjoy it herself.

Hedy stepped up with the confidence of long, long practice. Bare feet gripping easily at the smooth yet deliberately roughened surface, she stepped onto the pedestal, her fountain's clever design ensured she never felt the touch of water. Except for the few diamond-droplets she inevitably brought with her whenever she entered the magic circle of spray to begin her dreaming.

The pedestal wasn't high. But Aaron stumbled again as he joined her upon it.

He seemed in a daze. Seemed to have lost his way somewhere along the way, and to have become strangely docile. *Cautiously* docile and maybe, if Hedy had had any past experience by which to judge and sort and separate the truly ominous from the merely odd and unusual, ominously docile.

And then she turned to him.

Emboldened by the security of being once again in her own place, encouraged and strengthened by the magic that always flowed from it and into it, magic Hedy sometimes thought she had created for herself and at other times believed came from the fountain itself...from its very special place in the dark and secret, whispering woods that pressed in so close around it...Hedy turned to him.

She stepped close to him.

Raised her arms a very little since she was nearly as tall as he, and draped them lightly around his shoulders. Clasped her hands just as lightly behind his neck, lacing her fingers together in the loosest way possible...a way that

was no way at all. A way intended to hold barely, in a grip meant not to imprison and not to force. Not at all.

He stared down at her. With glittering eyes that at one moment seemed purely gray but then, in the next seemed to burn with a touch of elemental hazel, eyes that for all their brightness and gleam seemed to focus upon nothing and see nothing, Aaron said nothing.

Her heart skittered. Nervously.

And more nervously still when he placed his hands on her hips. When he placed them lightly, just as she'd clasped her hands behind his neck. But not so lightly that they failed to move her forward...move her and them deeper into the width of the pedestal, deeper toward its center. And closer to him at the same time. So that she felt the probing length of him, perfectly positioned by their so-compatible height, press against the exact part of her where such pressings were designed to reap the greatest result.

One of his hands drifted down. Slowly down, striking jewel sparks from quivering flesh beneath the thin and dampened silken fabric of her dress. His hand drifted all the way down, found her hem, lifted it. It tugged a little, long fingers momentarily ensnared in its fluttering points. But then he found his way. Swiftly and surely once the obstacle of her hem had been dealt with, he found the pathway to flesh. Bare flesh. On her thigh. And then just as swiftly, no longer ensnared but moving with the absolute certainty of a man who knew his way around and knew without a doubt exactly where he was going, and exactly what he meant to do once he got there, his fingers traced a skimming trail upward.

"God in heaven," he all but whispered when his fingertips found the bare and pulsing center of her. The needful, aching center of her.

"I...like..." She suddenly felt shy. Unaccountably,

agonizingly shy. "I like to dance naked. Except for my dress. I like the way it makes me feel. Elemental. Free." Breaking off abruptly, Hedy shivered. Again.

His fingertips stroked. Momentarily devastating. Then almost immediately they found entry, and one of them plunged.

Hedy caught her breath.

The finger plunged deep.

This felt so different from anything she'd done on her own. Any of the secret and up until now highly provocative murmuring explorations in the dead of night that, even if they had induced pleasure and resulted in satisfaction, had still lacked *something*. She'd never been quite sure what, and wasn't entirely sure even now. Was sure only that this time was different. This deep-plunging of a single digit she did not control and could never control, this plunging to a depth she'd never attained, a depth that pressed the hard knobs of Aaron's knuckles tight against flesh that suddenly shrieked with the joy and triumph of what he had released was entirely different. Maybe because that same flesh also shrieked with terror. Maybe because, terror or no, that flesh wanted, *demand*ed, he continue.

At his first sweeping, penetrating touch, her knees all but dissolved. Into water. Into something even less substantial than water.

Trembling, unable to tear her gaze from his, from the fascinating, wholly unexpected reflection of her own passion that she saw there, Hedy struggled to remain upright on those vanishing, vanished legs.

For passion it was.

She realized that with some last, fading shred of sensibility as her knees did, in fact, buckle beneath her.

Aaron caught her. Never removing the long and searchingly delightful, terrifying finger that had begun to

move inside her, begun to move and to caress in ways she'd never tried to caress herself, never so much as imagined she *could* caress, he slipped an arm around her waist and lowered her easily. Lowered her smoothly. To the pedestal upon which she'd previously only danced.

She felt tiny.

Fragile.

Felt like the lightest and loveliest, most female, of creatures, swooning in her fantasy lover's embrace.

She'd been aware of the rising heat within. Had realized her internal temperature had soared almost to scalding, scorching levels as the finger with which Aaron impaled her continued its slow-startling motion and, now that it had begun, created...invented...several more. It had been impossible not to be aware of the heat. But she hadn't realized how much heat there was, how scalding it had grown in almost no time at all, until her back touched the cool surface of marble. Until it seemed actually to sizzle against that coolness, sending up radiant plumes of steam that wafted dreamily before her dazzled, inexplicably drowsy eyes. Steam that, escaping every awakened and aroused pore of her body, writhed up in great and curling columns to mingle with and become intrinsic parts of the fog that thickened now, stirred by a rising, small wind carrying on its breath the magical lure of the sea. Fog that thickened to shelter them. To shield them even more.

Something burst within her.

Something sparkling.

Something composed of a hundred-million glittering shards that instantly separated to vanish into the billowing fog. Shards that seemed then to call out in forlorn voices, seeking more of their own kind. Calling forth more of their own kind, and inviting them to join the oblivion of the fog.

Clutching Aaron's upper arms, Hedy's fingers dug deep

into heavy muscle beneath the mist-softened fabric of his midnight-colored shirt. Clutching with all the feeble strength left after the recent explosion, she tried with just as little strength to pull herself away from the stone. Pull herself closer to the warmth of him.

“Easy.” Aaron moved his hand. Slowly. In more of those vaguely circular motions that stretched the flesh around her opening taut and tight. Stretching it in ways that, unaccustomed to this amount of penetration which instinct and her encounter with his hardened and enlarged shaft warned was no kind of penetration at all, caused it to ache in protest. Stretched tighter than it could possibly stretch beneath the continued aggravation of his motion, she tensed. All of her. Every part of her. Especially the inexperienced muscles that seemed to want desperately to mold themselves so firmly around his intruding finger that no further motion would be possible.

“You have to relax,” he insisted.

And she felt a second finger join the first. Felt it force its way inside past her ineffectually tightened opening. Felt it slip relentlessly into her even when she tried, more instinctively than from any conscious or planned effort, to flinch away. Felt it enter inexorably when he pressed her down, against the unyielding stone. When he pressed her with his free hand and the full weight of the body he’d maneuvered over hers in the instant she’d dropped, half-swooning, to lie there.

She felt the second finger. Felt it slide deeper. Then impossibly deeper. Felt it join the first and felt the sudden, sharp and bursting tear of pain as it did. And she cried out. A little.

“You need to relax.” Aaron made a scissoring motion with the two embedded fingers. Parting them gently but steadily, gently and unstoppably, he urged her flesh to part

as well...forced it to part farther and wider, surely, than it had ever been meant to part.

The penetrations had been painful. Momentarily. Both of them. But this...

Rolling her head slightly from side to side, both energized and oddly debilitated by Aarion's strenuous parting, Hedy moaned. Aloud. With a strength of new-found desperation that seemed to stir the mingled clouds of rainy-day mist and steam from her own body, mixing them into ever thicker, ever more concealing and sinuously swirling curtains hung somewhat uneasily between her...them...and the rest of the vanished world. If that world had ever existed.

This was *different*.

This was...words failed her. Even privately held, privately thought words. So she decided to call it spectacular. The most singularly maddening, utterly tormenting and fantastically *arousing* thing she'd ever known.

Arms flung up over her head, her legs somehow bent and lifted, tucked beneath Aaron's arms as he knelt over her, his hands and gaze plundering her, Hedy could no longer move. Could barely breathe. Aaron had trapped her. Had pinned her, legs outflung and upflung, legs parted in wanton abandon so that there would be no choice now...never any choice again...but to receive him. No choice but to receive whatever he might choose to inflict upon the churning depths of a body he'd already stirred to wildness never suspected.

Hands tangled in the floating, mist-dewed mass of hair she'd always considered too wavy to be attractive and far, far too red to be entirely decent, Hedy offered herself to him.

"That's better." Aaron's voice shook.

With something.

Not laughter.

Not exactly.

Saying that, he tugged at her one more time. Tugged her flesh wider. Tugged it so painfully, exhilaratingly wide that it must rip, must tear her completely in two for certain.

Hedy gave another cry. A short and pleading one, even as her body lunged upward of its own volition. As it quite literally *lunged*, trying to follow Aaron's hand when it left her behind with no warning whatsoever. When it left her yearning, needing, the newly plundered and now insatiable flesh closed again, and pulsating, screaming to recapture what it had lost. In any way it could.

"Now, my little naiad," he murmured, talking some kind of nonsense. "*Now!*" And upon that single word, he grasped her straining thighs even tighter. He pulled at them, tugging her body upward so that her hips left the smooth marble altogether. So that she half-hung, helpless and utterly at his mercy, unable to help herself. Unable to do anything but submit to the control she sensed he would wield absolutely in coming moments, in the coming taking of her. So that only her back lay upon her bed of white, white marble, and the rest of her tilted upward, spread and splayed, the naked center of her exposed and vulnerable to him.

He pulled her almost violently upward, pinning her legs beneath his arms so there would be no chance she could close them. No chance she could deny what he obviously meant now to take. And then he entered. With his gleaming, swollen shaft. With a single long and spearing slide that shoved the full, alabaster-hued length of it to the very bottom of her. A shove that wrenched a long and vibrating cry of agony from her as her body felt a burst of pain that was sharper than any it had ever been meant to

endure.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hedy's scream split the air. It rent the seething masses of mist that had replaced earlier afternoon's drizzle. It shattered that mist into streaming remnants of itself. The echoes of that scream as she hung there just as he wanted her, with her hair and arms splayed wide in glorious if helpless profusion and only the upper part of her back now supporting her weight, shattered the dripping stillness permanently. The echoes of it careened off tree trunks both seen and unseen, strong enough and terrible enough, startled still other echoes into motion. Until the entire forest became one mad turmoil of bouncing, chorusing echo upon echo upon unstoppable, resounding echo.

"Jesus."

He'd known Hedy was a virgin.

He'd suspected it almost from the start, from the moment he'd first spotted her cavorting in her circle of fountain. And once they'd gotten down to the real action, the fact of her virginity had been a little hard to miss. Especially when he'd had to work to tear her beneath the touch of the fingers with which he'd explored her.

Tight and silken, she'd put up no small amount of resistance when he'd slipped a single finger into her. He'd had to work hard to relax her...work harder than he remembered ever working over a woman, to make sure he'd have plenty of room to enter when the time was right.

When she lay in the preferred way, spread and defenseless before him and beneath him, her body too strained and too awkwardly positioned to allow her any kind of defense.

He'd done this plenty of times before. He'd subjugated plenty of women before her, some of them after quite satisfying, sometimes thrillingly brutal displays of resistance for him. So he'd known when the virgin was ready.

And the shimmer of entry into her, in those few immortal seconds when he'd caught her completely unaware in her innocence, had been without a doubt the single most intoxicating of his life.

He'd always avoided virgins before. Like the plague. And now he decided maybe that was his loss. His enormous, regrettable, fortunately rectified loss.

He'd always thought there was more available to satisfy him with someone who'd been broken in and taken around the block a few times. So much more, so easily offered and so easily taken. With no, or very little, chance of messy emotional scenes and possibilities of fatal entanglements.

That was what had always mattered. Even in sex.

Freedom to walk away afterward. Whenever he wanted. Freedom, because the whole thing had been strictly business to him, had been nothing more than the simple, straightforward and uncomplicated acquisition of something he wanted because he had the power to acquire it.

But he'd never counted on the shocking allure of innocence.

Shuddering as he reached the bottom of Hedy, shuddering even harder when her body tightened instinctively, convulsively, around him, almost to a degree that no further entry and no exit at all would be possible, Aaron could only wonder.

Had the scream that still careened wildly around their fog-shrouded clearing really been hers?

Or had it in fact been his?

No.

At the best of times he'd be incapable of creating a sound like that one...of creating such a mindless, boundless, shrilling shriek of terror and agony. And this was far from the best.

Right now and for some time past, he'd been unable to make any but the most guttural, trapped and all but inaudible of sounds.

Hedy had left him breathless. Unable to swallow, unable to focus a single thought upon anything but the otherworldly wonder of what he'd found. The wonder of sleek and shiver-inducing smoothness of untried flesh wrapping snugly around him...the soft smoothness of the woman herself...was that all-consuming. That all-encompassing and that incredibly all-engrossing.

Reaching the bottom, Aaron stopped.

Had to stop.

Had to take a long, trapped and trembling second to collect himself. To get his heartbeat under control and his breathing started again. So he could give some...a little...thought to withdrawal. One that would, if the straining tightness of her body was any indication, be one for the record books.

One to end a man's life.

He took time, too, to press himself deeper. To press himself as deep as possible into the heated cauldron of the woman who remained strangely receptive even as she seemed once again, almost terrified, to want to resist. He took that moment, as if he sensed it would be his very last, to savor the ripe richness of what he'd taken.

"You want more," he said in outright denial of the

searing tightening that said something else entirely, taking his time to reinforce the hold he maintained upon her.

“Please.” She looked up at him with wide eyes. Tear-sparkled sea green eyes. Watching him in her helplessness, pleading with him, still draped in her fiery glory across white and gleaming marble that no longer felt cool or cooling to the touch. Watched him, dangling high from the prisoning hardness of his shaft. Watched him, a ruby-vermilion butterfly impaled at the height of her most vital brilliance upon living flesh that would keep her just as she was for as long as he wanted. Living flesh that would ensure she remained his. To enjoy. To take delight in, and cherish for as long as...

Cherish?

The notion yanked a startled cry from him. A cry every bit as desperation-driven as hers had ever been.

How could he cherish? He, Aaron Keller, with his cool detachment that was about as soft and yielding as the stone upon which he held Hedy sprawled for his exclusive enjoyment.

What the hell had she done to him?

Astonished for the moment into horror-struck immobility even when the unraveling quivers that wracked his buried cock insisted he *had* to move soon to stroke, and satisfy, and ease suffering that had only barely begun to build, he stared back at her.

How the hell had she ensnared him like this?

Then Hedy moved. Impossible as it seemed, she found a way to move beneath him. Around him,

Her body transformed itself. Turned itself into a long and supple curve of pure energy. Into motion that didn't seem to really *be* motion as she steamed softly to life.

In that instant the compulsion to withdraw in a single stroke became too great to be resisted.

Cherished or not, Aaron tore himself from her. With another cry, as low and ragged as before, that mingled itself with her fresh shriek of outraged anguish.

“Noooo!”

Her arms, no longer limp or languid, if indeed they had ever been, lifted instantly. Tight-crooked fingers found the only flesh she could reach, even with her long and seeking arms. The soft flesh behind his knees. And they dug in. They pressed and clutched with a ferocity that would have hurt under other circumstances. Normal circumstances. At the moment, though, with other pains...that pain of parting if even just for a second...taking up all his attention, he barely noticed.

The pain she inflicted seemed a minor thing, compared to the shrieking delirium of a cock that didn’t want to leave at all yet knew it had to leave in order to come back. A cock that craved fresh entry, craved sparkling, lovely, soft and encapsulating entry with every thundering, destabilizing beat of a pulse that hammered molten suffering its entire length.

Now, *that* was pain.

That was utterly insurvivable agony.

“Aaron?” Hedy’s eyes glittered. Strangely. Like the eyes of no woman he’d known before. No *human* woman.

Once again the old idea, the one he’d all but forgotten in all the crowding-in of inconceivable ideas and even crazier notions, took root. The idea that she was some kind of magical creature. A naiad. A spirit of this very fountain in which he now found himself mated and inextricably entangled with her.

In which he found himself enchanted by her.

There could be no doubt now that he’d been caught up in some strange and otherworldly enchantment she’d spun. How else could he explain his sudden, all but unshakable

desire to take her and cherish her, forever? How else, pausing to shudder and tremble with divine delight at the very outermost entry to her, holding himself aloof at the sweetest, quivering verge of her, could he be afraid in all his soul to go on? How could he be so afraid she'd somehow slip away, and he'd lose what he'd only barely found?

Once again his body took over when his mind faltered. Driven by the heat of desire, consumed by the swirling blaze of it, he could not resist impulse when it told him to advance. Not so slowly this time, as his need boiled over. And not so smoothly, either.

There was a new roughness about this advance. A slightly tremulous, more than a little impatient unsteadiness in arms, and legs, and hips that translated into a precarious jerkiness in the flesh that slid much more easily, with much less resistance on her part, back into the numbingly intoxicating farthest reaches of her.

She'd opened since his first penetration.

She'd softened, too. So much that she hardly seemed solid any more. Hardly seemed any more real than the figment he'd so long and so fondly dreamed her to be. Her body turned to sweet and suffocating mist as he found his mark, not to pause this time but to drag himself backward at once, his entire body melting beneath the sheer, unimagined weight of her mist.

There would be no waiting now. Poised above her for the fraction of a second he still managed to control the all but uncontrollable urge to ram home and into her, Aaron looked down. Straight into eyes that seemed to irrefutably confirm two beliefs.

One, that it was quite possible this inhumanly soft, unbelievably moist and ever moistening female he'd captured was indeed a naiad, and thus never to be held.

Never to belong to any merely mortal, powerless and hopeless man.

And two, that he would die if he couldn't have her. If she wouldn't give herself willingly, if she wouldn't continue to give herself on and on, right into eternity.

Which only led to a third, equally unshakable and incomprehensible belief. One of the most startling beliefs he'd even been forced to own up to.

That it didn't matter what he wanted. Or how much he wanted it.

All that mattered was *her*. What he could give her. How much he could give her. Because he sensed that in giving to her, he could entice her to stay with him.

Maybe he sensed that was the only way he'd ever entice a creature made of mists and dancing waters to stay with him. Or maybe he'd changed in some inconceivable, fundamental way. In just these last few minutes, since he'd stumbled across the naiad dancing in her sparkling pool.

Aaron shivered. Only partly from the startling revelation about himself. Because the weight of need that continued to build inside him against all known or human odds as he began to creep forward was more than he could endure.

Creeping forward as slowly as was possible and still be said to move, he had to bite his lip. Had to bite it hard to keep from doing what he wanted, what instinct literally *demand*ed, screaming and shuddering, he do. To keep from ramming into her with all the force at his disposal, and to hell with the possibility of serious injury to one or both of them.

And so, teeth gritted, he crept. Eased. Stole.

Beneath him, the fantastic glitter of Hedy's green-eyed gaze never strayed a second, a millimeter, from his face. Releasing her killing grip, she dropped her hands from his knees. She let them fall back, flung them over her head and

allowed her fingers to wander into and twine themselves with deep and sinuous meanderings into the ends of her fiery hair. So she could lift it. Play with it. And all the while, her body strained toward his. Her breasts strained against thin silk that might as well not have been there. Silk that molded itself so exquisitely to her every curve that it left nothing at all to soaring imagination even while somehow, improbably, leaving every last thing to it.

Aaron insinuated himself deeper. The pulse in his cock thundered mightily.

As if she knew all about that pulsing, as if she felt a corresponding pulse inside herself, Hedy's eyes drifted shut, and Aaron mourned the loss of them. Mourned the deprivation of their loveliness. But then her body made another of its enticing, lively sweeps, muscles rippling perfectly beneath the silk of dress and skin as she somehow managed to drift, almost languidly, from side to side as he inched ever forward. In one moment she curved, then in the very next instant she took up an exactly opposite direction.

In moving that way, in swaying so seductively from side to side despite his failing arms that tried to hold her where he wanted her, Hedy carried his overextended and suffering cock along with her. She pressed the excruciatingly oversensitized head of it against her...against parts of the inside of her that he'd never thought or even tried to press before. With stunning effect.

Leaping, roaring to unbridled life, his cock slammed itself forward. Dragging his body along, forcing a small and potentially explosive whooshing of air from his lungs and an equally strained mumbling from between his lips as they parted slightly, it slammed itself all the way into her just as the tip of her tongue appeared. Rosy-perfect, it flicked lightly across her parted lips. The way it had flicked before, across desperate flesh.

And as she'd surely meant it to, his cock responded.

Instantly.

Already buried in its entirety inside the misty moistness that, naiad or not, was the chief wonder of her, the arguably greatest beauty and attraction of all Hedy's beauties and attractions, it quivered. As if it had been struck a deadly blow by lightning. And quivering, it tingled. More desperately than he'd ever known it to tingle before, it made its wishes...demands...known in no uncertain terms.

Pull back!

The command ricocheted wildly inside his head. His confused brain struggled mightily to catch hold of it so he could examine it and hope to make some rational sense of it. But only instinct remained able to understand completely, now that reason had failed.

Without so much as a blink of an eye, with even less time taken for hesitation, Aaron did as instinct instructed. He pulled back. Dragging engorged, demanding flesh across and through the smooth moisture of hers with unprecedented roughness. Seeking release, relief. And not finding it. Not finding even the smallest shard or shred of it.

When he pulled away, Hedy's voice rang out again, sharply, against banked swirlings of mist-fog that had thickened again. Fog that blotted out everything even inches beyond the magic circle of diamond-water jets that protected their resting place. Harsh and unhappy as her cry was, it and every one of its echoes vanished as they had before. Instantly. Into the surrounding shroud. As if they'd never been uttered.

But Aaron knew they had.

He knew it unmistakably, inarguably, when Hedy's hips lifted even more than he'd already lifted them. When her entire body stiffened and surged toward his, all but coming

all the way up and off the bed upon which he'd so naively believed he could ever make her his prisoner. When she hungrily pursued what he'd so foolishly thought was his to deny her.

Even for a second.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Just like she'd suspected all along, passion drove her. And desperation.

Intolerance, too...of the idea that Aaron should think he could leave her at a time like this. Just when he'd brought her nearly screaming to the verge of...

She'd had orgasms before. She wasn't *that* green and inexperienced. They'd been orgasms induced by herself, for herself. And they'd been highly satisfactory. Or she'd thought so in her general ignorance of anything better. But they'd been nothing like this.

Nothing!

There was a craving...an insatiable, burning need to have more of what Aaron had so far, somewhat surprisingly considering her earlier certainty that he was a greedy and insufferably selfish man, given so freely.

There was a suffering of delight. An agony of sensation no woman...no living creature...should ever be expected to survive indefinitely. This was something that had taken hard hold of her, something that had seized her between iron fists, something that had long since filled her with an inalterable determination to see herself satisfied. Something that would not be denied. No matter how much Aaron might think he was capable of toying with her, of teasing her and torturing her and, she still feared with some deep and hidden segment of her mind that hadn't completely

accepted the reality of what was happening to her, of ultimately leaving her like this. She was capable of more.

So very much more.

She'd realized that a while ago. That no matter how it might seem or look, she was in charge. She had every advantage, and what was more, had the wits and the motivation to exercise them to their fullest.

Driven by that knowledge she followed relentlessly, single-mindedly, when Aaron made his move to leave her. Thrusting her body upward with a strength and agility never before dreamed of, she kept him within her with surprisingly, astonishingly little effort.

"Christ almighty, Hedy." Incredibly, he was still trying. Was still pulling with strength that seemed negligible now, in the face of what she'd found. "You have to let me..." He tried again. Harder. And she felt herself begin to slip. Only a little, but very definitely to slip.

"I can't," she mumbled hoarsely, through gritted teeth. "You have to..."

"I will." Satisfyingly, Aaron sounded no more steady than she. "But you have to give me a chance."

She did then. But only because he left her little choice.

Recovering his strength almost as quickly as he'd lost it, Aaron finally succeeded. Or at least he started to succeed.

Using the leverage he possessed, firming the grip he held on knees and thighs he'd so long ago tucked up close to his waist and beneath his arms, he held her steady. And once again took up the agonizing, aggravating process of leaving...an even slower process now, as the arms with which he both supported himself and trapped her began to quiver. Violently.

It was a scandalously, sinfully delightful and delighting process. One that turned Hedy's every internal part to quavering starlight, one that before she'd even suspected it

was about to happen, sent a scalding plume of molten, liquid starlight surging through her. Starlight that dazzled with its brilliance. Disoriented with its strange heat. And disturbed above all else, as Aaron at long last reached the outermost limit to which he could retreat without retreating altogether, without separating from her altogether.

“My God, Hedy. You have to...give me a chance to...” This time when Aaron spoke, it was in a harsh rush of breath between tight-clenched teeth. But his tone was gentler. Was much less ragged, was suffused with a soft note of sheerest, most astonished wonder.

Overcome by the rushing intensity of her internal starlight, Hedy did her best to keep up with his breathing. To match him breath for jagged, tearing breath as the inevitable...of course it was inevitable, how could it ever have been anything *but* inevitable...began.

Aaron advanced. No longer slowly. He slammed forward, the force of what common sense and the roiling turmoil of stardusted passion inside her own body told her *had* to be the last time. Slammed hard enough to drive her backward across the marble, wrenching from her a strange, exultant cry when she came to rest finally near the pedestal’s edge with him fully embedded. Throbbing with an urgency that matched and exceeded his own, she came to rest with her head tilted backward over the pedestal’s smooth-rounded edge and her hair tossed every which way. With her hair floating out into the path of the never-ending jets of water that soaked it through at one, flinging diamond-droplets into her eyes and face.

Aaron advanced. Reached his limit. Stopped.

And then he began a new pulsating. A new and more immediate kind of trembling at the innermost depth of her. A very, very *final* kind of trembling that boded exceedingly well. For her, and for the unbridled chaos of starlit,

starstruck and steaming sensations she felt roiling within. Sensations that in the very next instant boiled over, sending stream upon stream of stars simmering through her.

Stream upon stream that scorched with awakening awareness everywhere they touched. Streams that only turned to more heat, and then even more as Aaron's body convulsed inside hers.

Jerking with new urgency, he seemed to want to drive even deeper as each of those streams released. Though of course, that was impossible.

Sliding again, Hedy twisted her wrists around so she could grip the lip of her impromptu bed. Her head dropped back even more and her body arched, her throat extending perfectly to receive the hot kiss Aaron immediately pressed to it. He bent over her on arms that shook visibly, his breath burning hard against the throat she'd exposed so involuntarily, yet so eagerly. As deep inside her there came a new burning. A sudden *explosion* of burning that poured from her body to mingle most alarmingly with a similar bursting and flowing, inundating explosion from him.

Singly and by themselves, the explosions were enough to devastate everything....every form of life...within their range. But together...

Hedy shivered.

Her body again tried to turn itself to a cloud of steaming, floating moisture around the shaft that held her still. That held her pinned to marble that also now seemed about to evaporate as a result of her...their...joined and commingled orgasm.

Gasping, she clung as tight as she could with fingers that slid and slipped dangerously across cool marble, trying hard to steady herself as all the world around her...all the mist-shrouded, concealed and hidden world shifted crazily upon some axis she'd never known about. It began to rotate

almost out of control in a new and thoroughly disorienting plane.

Within her, the bursting lasted only a short time...a woefully short time. It burned itself out in that one heart-stuttering series of bursts, and left her gasping beneath Aaron. Left her barely sensate enough to be aware that a similar ending had overcome him.

Shuddering mightily, he strained. His every muscle tightened to nearly inhuman tension for a fraction of a second. Every muscle jerked once, then twice. His buried shaft, too, the engorged length of it seeming for that single, glorious fraction of an instant to swell even more. To swell painfully for both of them, to swell absurdly as it engorged itself even more and then, just when Hedy knew she could survive no more, he released.

Completely.

Falling back from her in almost the same instant, his strength quite obviously spent entirely in the sudden, fiery bursting of his body inside hers, Aaron came to rest partially on his face on the marble pedestal. And partially, mostly, on his side so that he faced her. And silence hung. Unbroken.

Unbreakable, maybe. Though of course that wasn't the case, could never be the case.

"What you said before..." Aaron spoke hesitantly, and only after the very longest of times. Only after he'd had a chance to catch breath he feared might never be caught.

Hedy rolled her head toward him. Rolled it in an utterly spent, deliciously listless way. "What did I say, Aaron? I don't remember saying anything."

"You said it before. A long time ago. Something about this place."

If he remembered correctly, she'd said *several* somethings. And he knew she remembered too, when he

saw her eyes blaze suddenly. When she propped herself up on an elbow and glared down at him. "That's right," she agreed. "You had some kind of asinine idea that you were going to demolish everything whether it belonged to you or not. Just so you could build shacks for rich people."

It hadn't been asinine.

Aaron thought he should be angry at her audacity. Her questioning of his right and his wisdom to do whatever he goddamned well chose with his property. The property he owned, without even a chance of a reasonable doubt.

It was a fact the old Aaron would have been angry. Furious. But there it was. The fact.

He'd changed.

Somehow.

Inside.

He was *not* the old Aaron any more. He wasn't sure if he liked that, wasn't sure if he welcomed it. But there could be no mistaking it and for sure no going back on it. He had changed and he was waiting, the way the old Aaron would never have condescended to wait, to hear what she had to say. Waiting until he realized she was waiting herself, challenging him with furious, sea-colored eyes, to say something in his own defense.

"It's my land," he declared. The argument sounded impossibly lame. Even childish. But he plowed ahead with it, anyway. "I can do whatever I want with it. And you, nor no one else, can do a thing to stop me."

"The Historical Association..."

"Is a bunch of crackpots and loonies who can't pull themselves together long enough to agree on anything. By the time they manage to make a plan and take any kind of action, there'll be nothing left of those moldering ruins in the woods except a lot of dust and rubble."

Sitting all the way up, Hedy began to tug at her

ridiculous, tattered dress. Began to try to straighten it with hands that jerked as her green eyes blazed even hotter.

God in heaven, she was mad. Madder than mad. She was...

"I thought you were selfish and greedy before," she all but spat. "But now I see you're a selfish, greedy fool!"

"Fool?"

Still Aaron's anger wouldn't ignite. Not even when he practically ordered it to ignite. The best he could manage was a strangely mild, almost comically conversational "what the hell you do mean by that?"

Hedy was on her feet now. Towering over him. And it was with another gut-wrenching new hardening that he realized he could see all the way up...all the way under her dress that was no longer really a dress. All the way to the succulent, bursting flesh he'd so recently possessed. And wanted only, in that instant, to possess again.

Not that possession was going to be an option any time soon. Not with her so blazingly, beautifully mad.

"I keep trying to tell you," she hissed through small and even, perfectly white teeth. "You have no right to anything on this land. You've been made a fool of by somebody, and I'm not about to stand around and see everything that's precious here...everything that has so much meaning...destroyed just because you're too stupid to know the difference between some crook, and a genuine business deal!"

"Excuse me, Hedy, but I don't think you have any..."

"But I guess there's no accounting for greed, is there?" Stepping down from the pedestal upon which he still lay, she continued to glare at him, though from more of a distance now. "I guess there's nothing like pure greed to make a man act like a jackass."

"Can I say something here?"

“No, you can’t!”

“Not even one little thing?”

“You’re a fool, Aaron. You were taken, and I think you know it. I know you don’t care about anything but your g...goddamned...”

She was nearly in tears now. And cursing, too. Which could only mean she was really, really on the verge of being in a state, “...b...business deals. But that land has been in Miss Tizzie’s family from the beginning. And neither one of us is going to let you do a thing to what’s on it. Do you hear me?”

Aaron guessed everyone along the eastern seaboard...at least everyone along the Delaware portion of the eastern seaboard...could hear her right now. She was that worked up. That agitated.

He opened his mouth again. On a spurt of long-overdue anger of which the old Aaron Keller would be proud.

But no words would come.

Because there was too much of truth in too much of what Hedy had just finished saying.

The agent he’d dealt with hadn’t been the usual one...the one he’d always dealt with. This agent had been a friend of a friend of a friend. Someone who’d approached him with a deal that had quite honestly played upon every bit of the greed of which Hedy had accused him. A deal that very same greed had found too good to pass up. Too good even to allow common sense to kick in and scream its warning that the terms being laid were just too damned good to be true.

It was the classic con.

The classic set-up.

And he’d apparently...if Hedy’s information checked out later as he had little doubt it would...fallen for it like the biggest, most naïve idiot who’d ever been given a dollar

and told to go play with it on the carnival midway.

Of course her information was going to check out. In addition to about a hundred other things, she appeared to him now as the voice of reason. The cool cloth to end the frenzy of greed-induced fever that had had him doing all sorts of wild things...all sorts of foolish and foolhardy ones.

"Those Pettys...from that house you're so anxious to tear down..." Hedy was shouting now, over her shoulder as she pirouetted away from him in a move more fantastical and arousing than any she'd made before, as she melted into fog that very quickly made of her nothing more than a suggestion of a form, then almost immediately thereafter swallowing her into complete invisibility. "They gave their lives to make this country a country." Her voice, disembodied in the thickness that had closed around her, floated back to him like something out of an unearthly dream. "They knew their duty and they did it. All of them. They fought to make this country. Because they believed in what it stood for. Believed in what it could be!"

"Hedy?" Disoriented, Aaron tried to lift his head. And couldn't.

God, how it suddenly ached. So badly that all he could do in the end was lift a shaking hand and press the back of it against eyes that teared with the pain of what she'd done to him. What she was still doing.

"And they all died," Her words came from the very farthest, grayest distance now, barely audible above the searing roar between his temples. "They all died. But not so that jackasses like you could destroy every memory of them. Not so that you could think you have some God-given right to take just because you want. Just because you have no regard for anything but yourself."

CHAPTER NINE

The naiad had stolen his pants.
Aaron couldn't believe it.

He'd searched and searched, all over the place where he'd crouched to watch her, and the places she'd led him in her tormenting of him. And the pants *weren't* there. Or his underwear, or his shoes.

They were gone. Taken by the only person who could have taken them, the only person who'd been here with him. And now he, Aaron Keller, maker of multi-million-dollar deals and possessor of fortunes earned on those deals, squatted in wet bushes naked from the waist down, with nowhere at all to go. Without even the keys to the Range Rover so he could at least use the blanket in the back seat to cover himself.

He was out here by himself, except for what he'd thought...really and genuinely this time, for a heart-stopping instant or two...were the ghosts of a few wandering, quite possibly vengeful old-line Pettys.

It had been enough to scare the bejesus out of a man. Even a usually level-headed man like himself, who knew beyond even the slightest shiver of doubt that there was no such thing as ghosts. Vengeful, or otherwise.

Just like there was no such thing as naiads?

Then he'd tumbled to the real truth. And that was way

scarier than facing down an entire horde of screeching, howling, long-dead musket-waving Revolutionary Pettys.

The horrible truth was that he was *not* alone in these woods.

The real truth was that the creature who beat at the bushes around the edge of the fountain's clearing with a sturdy aluminum cane, bushes that lay perilously close to the place where he crouched afraid to move with his cock hanging free because any movement could only call attention straight to himself, was no ghost.

The creature was a woman. An old one. And she was calling his name.

His name.

As if she knew specifically that he was here.

Which of course she did.

The old, old woman shrieking "Aaron Keller, I know you're in there!" with every vicious thwack of a cane that continued to move ever, unerringly and spine-dissolvingly closer to his hiding place and "come on out of there, sonny boy!" in between thwacks, was Hedy's Miss Tizzie. She could be no other. And he could be in no worse trouble.

He was just about to make a break for it, bare ass or no. Was just about to cut and run in full confidence that this old girl couldn't possibly keep up with him even if she wanted to, when the cane thwacked down right in front of his face. It thwacked down so close he felt the breeze of its passage as it ripped the branches with which he'd tried to conceal himself from his hands and mashed them flat. So close that his cock shriveled even more, trying to shrivel to downright nothing as the breeze stroked across its sensitive and suffering tip. And from the realization as his gaze met the old woman's and the two locked with a snap he could practically hear and practically feel right down to the bottom of his soul, that she *knew* he was bare-assed and

fully exposed.

"Well, then," she said. "So you're the city-boy jackass."

Aaron blinked against light that, watery and insubstantial as it was, suddenly seemed too bright. Startlingly bright. "How did you..." Confused, he shook his head. Lifted a muddied hand, and wiped his eyes, leaving half-dried smudges on the inside of his lenses.

The old lady simply stood over him, peering dispassionately down at him.

"I could have sworn I saw a..." Aaron's voice was as weak as all the rest of him felt. "You're going to think this is flat-out nuts, but I could have sworn I saw a...*had* a...*naiad*."

The old lady didn't move. Or speak.

"You know."

But he didn't suppose such a rough and unrefined...make that an uneducated, uninformed and thoroughly bucolic...old girl would have the slightest idea what the hell he was talking about.

"A spirit. Of the..." He made a feeble and half-hearted gesture, "...f...fountain."

The old lady laughed then. She cackled, and the echoes of it boomed painfully, drowning out even the no longer pleasant or soothing rattle-tat-tat of the jets of water in the fountain. Jets that now, as they surely had always done, struck an empty pedestal where no statue, living or stone, had ever stood. Much less danced. "That's no magic spirit you saw," she informed him. "And I think you know it, too."

"Miss Tizzie?" Aaron could barely convince his mouth to form the syllables.

"That's right. Now come on up out of there if you know what's good for you, Aaron Keller."

"I...uh, that is..."

Impossible!

He couldn't be *blushing*?

But he was. He could feel the shame-filled burn of it all the way down to the roots of his hair...all the way down to the root of a shame-filled and still shriveling something else.

That was *not* like him. So not like him that it terrified him almost as much as the idea of confronting Hedy's Miss Tizzie in his present state of undress.

"You missing something?" To his horror, the old woman held up a pair of khakis and one of boxers. Very, very familiar stained khakis and blue-checked boxers. She held them up, dangling them just beyond his reach, from the end of one gnarled and ancient finger.

"I...uh..."

"Hedy told me about you," Miss Tizzie declared. "Spyin' on her and fondlin' yourself in the bushes. A man could be arrested for doin' that, y'know."

Aaron did know. And the knowing made him all sick inside. Made him shrivel even more. Shrivels so much he almost wasn't even there any more.

Miss Tizzie tossed him the clothes. "Get dressed," she ordered. "And get your ass out here where I can get a good, sharp look at you."

Aaron scrambled to do as she said. Turning his back to her as completely as he could without completely rising and exposing what little of his swollen shame remained, he tugged and pulled at his clothing a little frantically, all the while glancing repeatedly over his shoulder at the old woman who hadn't moved. Nor batted an eyelid. "What can you possibly know about me?" he demanded.

"Stars above, you're a bigger fool than Hedy thought, aren't you?"

"Fool?" Aaron had been called that just a few times too

many in the last hour or so. Though if he was ever forced to admit the truth, he sure as hell was starting to feel like one. Starting to feel incapable of doing or saying one single, solitary, goddamned thing to prove he wasn't one.

"That's right." Miss Tizzie aimed an accusing cane at him. "A *damned* fool who can't even hang on to his own *pants* whilst he's running around in somebody else's woods. Now, get on out here. Before I lose the last of my patience with the likes of you."

Once again Aaron scrambled to do as he was told. He scrambled forward, through the screen of bushes and into the open, mist-moist swath of grass with the dancing, glittering fountain that had long since lost any magical enchantment it might once have exerted. He scrambled to face Miss Tizzie...face up to her.

"Now, then," she said. "What's all this claptrap about you thinking you own my land, and plannin' to tear down what's on it?"

"I...uh..."

Planting her cane firmly on the wet grass, Miss Tizzie leaned on it with both hands. "Hedy told me you were a real slick-tongued devil. She said you had a real charmin' way with words," she observed. "She said that was how you worked it so you could have your way with her. But looks like Hedy might've been just a little bit wrong about that. If you ask me."

Ask her? Hell no, he hadn't. But he'd just discovered his keys, the ones to unlock the Range Rover and start it up so he could blaze the quickest trail possible out of here, were nowhere to be found. Not in either pocket of his khakis. Which could only mean he'd lost them in the woods, or...

Looking at Miss Tizzie, he thought 'or' was the likelier possibility.

She looked like a woman who'd take a man's keys right

out of his pants and hang on to them until she'd said everything she figured there was to say.

"Hedy," he said around a gulp of real, despairing dismay.

"Sure." For a second Aaron thought the old lady might be about to laugh again. Cackle maniacally, like she might be thinking about inflicting some *real* damage with that cane. "Hedy. You know. Redhead you took over there in the fountain like some kind of drunken sailor on a wartime shore leave?"

"With all due respect, Miss Tizzie. I don't think that's exactly how it happened." Though in truth Aaron wasn't all that certain that *wasn't* exactly how it had happened.

After all, he'd taken Hedy to the fountain. Hadn't he?

Or had she taken him?

He shook his head. The whole sequence of events that had started when Hedy parted the bushes in front of him and ended when Miss Tizzie did much the same thing with her thrashing cane was a little chaotic in his mind. Much of it was *missing* from his mind. As if the addiction he'd felt and still felt for the redheaded naiad was a real addiction, one that seriously impaired his ability to think.

"Well, that's neither here nor there." Miss Tizzie sounded suddenly philosophical about it. A whole hell of a lot more philosophical than had seemed possible when she'd been coming after him in a fury of flattened shrubbery. "Hedy told me it happened, and it didn't seem to disturb her all that much. So I figure even if it was a stupid move, it was her stupid move to make, and she's plenty old enough to be making it if she wants. No, what's got our Miss Hedy all in an uproar and seeing all the possible shades of red is this damned-fool notion that you have some kind of claim to my land. That you think you have some kind of God-given right to just start tearing things

down willy-nilly over yonder, where nothing at all's about be torn down. Now, or as long as I'm alive and capable of stopping it. Which I warn you, young man, is going to be one good long time."

"I have a bill of sale." Aaron knew he should give up. His voice sounded weak and almost cowed, and he hated it. Because it sounded like he was all ready to admit publicly what in the privacy of his heart he'd only recently, only in the last little while started to admit to himself.

That Miss Tizzie...Hedy...was right.

That he was a fool.

That he was the worst kind of greedy, pig-headed, overbearing fool who'd put way too high a value on things like money that weren't going to keep him warm and happy at all. A fool who'd been greedy and overbearing in just about every way it was possible to *be* greedy and overbearing. A fool who'd been taken for the biggest ride of his life in the end, just because of that greed and that overbearing belief in himself as the only person in the universe who could ever be right, who could ever lie or cheat or tell not-so-legitimate truths in the course of using others for what he could wring from them.

He didn't like that. Didn't like any of it. Not one damned, insufferable bit of it.

Miss Tizzie was grinning. "I expect you know by now that bill of sale's in no way legit."

Aaron inclined his head. He didn't allow it to hang, because it wasn't in him, ever, to allow such a thing. Not even when he felt every bit the fool everyone knew he was.

"Smart boy like you," the old lady said and once again looked like she wanted to cackle. "Didn't it enter your head for even a second to check ownership of the property before you plunked down one hefty chunk of money to buy it?"

No. Of course not. The agent had said it was a deal too good to be passed up. He'd said anyone would jump on it, he had others all ready to jump on it at the first word of it, and he was only offering it to Aaron as a favor to...hell, Aaron couldn't remember who the hell it had been supposed to be a favor to. Nobody he'd ever met or known, probably.

"And I suppose you did pay a great big, whopping chunk for it?"

Aaron shook his head. "Only as much as I had to pay."

Miss Tizzie pursed her lips. As if she'd just tasted something horrific. Or smelled something worse than unbearable. "Yes. Well. That's the sweet and lovely thing about the way your kind always works. Isn't it?"

His kind?

Aaron felt himself start to bristle. The desire to protest...to outright *argue*...rose up hot and overwhelming inside him. But obviously Miss Tizzie had said everything she'd set out to say. On that subject, anyway.

"Hedy's waitin'" she declared, pointing vaguely with her cane in the direction of the ocean and what Aaron assumed must be her house. "At my place. She'd never, no way, want you to come callin' in that no-count, white-trash tarpaper shack her daddy calls a proper home."

No-count?

Heated words, *angry* words, bubbled to Aaron's lips in a fit of protectiveness so unexpected and so uncharacteristic, it left him speechless.

White trash?

"Don't know exactly why, but that young'un seems to want you to come to her," Miss Tizzie went on. "But then, she's a lot like her mama. A dreamer, Myrtle Chapin was. Didn't have a lick of sense or wits about her, and if you don't believe me, then all you have to do is look at the

piece of trash she up and married before she was old enough to know better.”

Aaron’s brain reeled.

Myrtle Chapin...he supposed she must be Hedy’s mother...didn’t have a lick of sense? Or was the old lady trying to say *Hedy* didn’t have sense?

Any way he looked at it, it didn’t matter. Because he knew it did not apply to his redhead. His Hedy.

He’d kill with his bare hands any man, woman, or even child who might dare to suggest it did apply.

“Hedy’s mama gave her all kinds of crazy notions. Filled Hedy’s head with all kinds of dreams about things that aren’t going to come true. Not that I’m sayin’ dreams are bad, mind you. But why that fool woman had to put the notion into Hedy’s mind that she was some kind of raving beauty and some kind of talented dancer the world was just waitin’ for, I have no idea.”

Maybe Hedy’s mama... Aaron assumed from the way Miss Tizzie talked about her that she must be either dead, or long since run away...*did it because she knew Hedy was a raving beauty.*

It was on the tip of his tongue to say so, but he decided against it when Miss Tizzie, true to fashion, plowed on.

“That girl could be anything she wants to be,” she declared sadly.

Well, of course.

“But nobody’s ever going to stop to give her the chance.” Miss Tizzie didn’t sound contemptuous. She didn’t look condescending, or mean. She merely looked and sounded terribly, terribly sad when she said, with another and smaller shake of her head, “she’s a sweet girl. But in the end that piss-ant daddy of hers is going to win out. In the end he’s just going to marry her off to one of those good-old good-for-nothin’ boys down at the

roadhouse by the inlet. He's going to sell her off, so to speak, as a prize in one of his drunken poker games, and she's going to end up just like her mama. Married to someone beneath her, and bearin' a baby that's going to have no more chance than she's ever had.

Shakily, Aaron shifted his position. As much in anticipation of movement to come as to ease the discomfort he already felt growing in cock and balls that had begun, definitely begun, to look forward to seeing his Hedy again. "She won't," he mumbled, stumbling. And would have fallen flat on his face in the muddy, crushed grass if Miss Tizzie hadn't reached out just in time with a gnarled and surprisingly strong hand to snatch his arm and hold him on his feet.

"She isn't," he said again thickly, struggling with a clumsy and unresponsive hand to set his glasses straight on his face. "Going to marry some drunk from a bar. Because she's beautiful. Because she's special, and..."

Oh, so talented.

In so very many ways.

"Well, I'll be." Miss Tizzie released him when he tried to pull away. "I knew Hedy had it bad for you the instant she came runnin' into my parlor with her face all on fire and her eyes glitterin' like a couple of fresh-found diamonds. But *you*?" She shook her head. "You sound like you got it just as bad."

Aaron supposed he did. Staggering away in the direction Miss Tizzie had pointed, he didn't really know. The only thing he could be sure of at that moment was that he had to find Hedy.

He had to find Miss Tizzie's house, whatever it might turn out to be, had to find the ethereal redhead who might not truly be a naiad, but who would always to him be the most magical and irresistible creature on the face of the

planet.

He had to find *his* Hedy.

Because she'd changed him with her untrained yet strangely perfect pirouetting dance. Sweet Hedy, liberal Hedy, Hedy who'd given everything simply and from her heart in ways he'd never in his life been able to give, had changed every intrinsic thing about him. With the magic of her spell, she'd made him do his own kind of pirouette, down in his heart, where that simplest of moves had all the power to save him from what he'd been in so much danger of becoming.

Greedy. A greedy and unfeeling tyrant.

But Hedy had won. In her way, she had mercifully won. Because liberality, the sweet and giving spirit of liberality, had the ultimate power to pummel greed and bring it permanently to its knees. For all time.

And he had to take her away from her daddy and his tarpaper shack.

He had to give her the chance she so richly deserved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of a small town not far from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Evelyn Starr always had a passion for the glamorous, the exotic, the sensuous. And she's always been willing to travel the world in search of them. Among her favorite places are Boldt's Castle in the Thousand Islands, Tasmania, Australia's tropical Queensland, and all the nooks and crannies of the Rocky Mountains she now calls home.

Like her wanderlust, Evelyn's fascination with words and stories began at an early age. She remembers being able to read and write before she started school, and by the time she'd finished first grade, she was writing her own little one-page stories. Following graduation from high school, she left her small-town home and hasn't looked back. She majored in journalism, romance, and adventure, and eventually married her college sweetheart, who remains the most romantic, and the most adventurous, hero of them all.