

KATHLEEN E.
WOODIWISS

A SEASON
BEYOND A
KISS

DOUBLEDAY DIRECT LARGE PRINT

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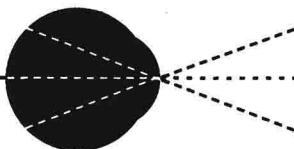
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Near Charleston, South Carolina
July 29, 1803

Reluctantly Raelynn Birmingham roused from slumber and lifted an eyelid to peer menacingly toward the open French doors through which drifted a distant, repetitive pounding. The sun had barely weaned itself from its earthly breast, yet a clammy warmth, augmented by a brief downpour during the night, had already stolen into her second-story bedroom. In spite of the portent of unbearable heat and humidity, Raelynn considered her chances of getting a few more moments of sleep . . . *if* she could bestir herself from the chamber's stately four-poster long enough to close

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the portals. Through most of the hours of darkness just past, she had tossed in restless frustration upon her lonely bed, tormented by sensual longings her handsome husband had awakened within her, cravings that were as yet unappeased after almost two weeks of marriage. If not for the untimely intrusion of a predacious blackguard, who, with his hired rabble, forced his way into the plantation house on her wedding night, and the barrier she had personally set between her bridegroom and herself a day later after hearing a young wench accuse him of siring her unborn child, Raelynn had no doubt that she would have now been sharing not only her husband's bed but all the pleasures to be found in matrimony. Truly, in this case, ignorance might have led to bliss if not for a girl named Nell.

The idea of remaining ensconced in bed didn't seem nearly so appealing when Raelynn realized she had been perspiring enough to have dampened her batiste nightgown. It clung to her with maddening persistence until she was driven to pluck the garment away from her bosom and fan herself with it, creating a billowing motion

that forced a light current of cooling air over her moist skin. It brought instant relief, but, at best, it would last no longer than her efforts.

Her lengthy yawn bordered on a recalcitrant groan as she crawled from the bed and tottered drowsily to the washstand. There she poured water into the porcelain washbasin and cupped the liquid to her face, hoping to put her doldrums to flight. The benefits proved just as fleeting, and no less groggy, she lent her attention to brushing her teeth.

Foreseeing a lingering lethargy unless she regained some small portion of the sleep she had lost, Raelynn pondered her chances of subduing the noise to create a more restful mood. In such a quest, she wove an unsteady path to the French doors, but upon reaching the glass-paned portals, it dawned on her that if she closed them, the room would then become stifling. Her bedchamber was one of four opening out onto the veranda that stretched across the back of the house. Only Jeff's larger chambers next door and the bedroom at the opposite end of the structure had combinations of windows

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and French doors. The middle two only had a double set of the latter.

When presented a choice between suffocating within the confines of a hot, stuffy room and suffering through the noisy hammering, Raelynn decided forthwith that she could tolerate the racket far better than the unbearable alternative. Far removed from England's moderate weather, she was now ensconced in Oakley Plantation House, located in the Carolinas where she had been warned prior to her arrival that temperatures could soar to sweltering degrees in the summer, especially in the latter months of the season. It was not a place to lightly dismiss the discomfort and hazards of rising temperatures.

A disconcerted sigh escaped Raelynn as she leaned a shoulder against the jamb and swept her gaze beyond the white balustrade bordering the outer limits of the gallery. Some time after the rain, a thick haze had crept over the land. Even now, it seemed to isolate the manse in a world of its own. Wreathed by the milky vapors, a row of huge, sprawling live oaks created a vague rampart of blurred darkness across the spacious back yard, obscuring every-

thing beyond them as they separated the main grounds from the servants' quarters, a collection of cabins, ranging in size from small to large, that resided in the shade of other lofty trees. Raelynn had no need to probe the mists to locate the area from whence the din arose. She knew as well as anyone living on the plantation that behind the third tree a new structure was presently being erected for the black housekeeper and her small family. Less than a fortnight ago, charred ashes and blackened timbers were all that remained of Cora's home and possessions, yet, as late as yesterday afternoon, Raelynn had seen pitched rafters rising above the new timbers that now formed the outer shell of the structure.

Making no attempt to stifle another yawn, Raelynn lifted her long, auburn tresses off her neck. In such climes her hair had proven as heavy and warm as wool, and in view of the heat yet to come, which only promised to worsen as they entered August, she could only foresee added discomfort unless she started braiding the thick mass before retiring at night.

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In preceding years, when her father had been respected as a loyal subject and emissary of King George the Third of England, the name of James Barrett, Earl of Balfour, had drawn swarms of guests to her family's London estate. For those lavish affairs her personal maid had coifed her hair with an artistic flare, the beauty of which had drawn raves from friends and guests who had lavishly praised not only the styles, but the rich color and lush texture. In gracious response she had acknowledged their compliments, lending little consideration to her maid's talents or toils that, even on a diurnal basis, had seen the auburn tresses arranged in more sedate, yet no less charming modes.

That was *then*. Now Raelynn had to care for the unruly mane herself, making her fully conscious of the arduous task just keeping her hair clean and reasonably subdued in a chignon. Merely combing out the tangles after every washing was an ordeal, one which had recently led her to consider the benefits of reducing its length by at least half, but she had refrained, not at all certain how her husband would react to such a change. Considering the formi-

dable wall she had erected in her marriage with her refusal to yield herself to the intimacy involved in a marital union, she dared not tweak Jeffrey's temper any more than she had possibly done already. Her sire would have had a bloody fit if she had had the audacity to do such a thing while he had still been alive, and she couldn't say with any assurance that her husband would tolerate such a deed any better. Though in preceding weeks she had glimpsed Jeffrey's unyielding tenacity only once, and that during his confrontation with Nell, she had nevertheless been left with the impression that there were definite limits to what Jeffrey Birmingham would tolerate. As yet, she had not dared test that extent herself, certainly not after her request for separate beds, for to do so had seemed a definite pathway to folly.

Deliberately Raelynn turned her thoughts away from that sensitive subject, and in an attempt to stretch and tauten her muscles, she twisted this way and that several times before bending forward and pressing her palms flat upon the floor. Upon rising again, she arched her back as

far as she could go, and then repeated the exercises.

On the voyage from England, steerage had been packed nigh to overflowing with passengers, and there had been little space to walk about in the dark, dank hole to which the less fortunate had been consigned. Any movement beyond the limited area her mother and she had been allotted had usually entailed bothering others, which they had both been reluctant to do. Her inactivity throughout the whole of those three months had left a lingering stiffness that, even now, was still noticeable immediately following her initial departure from bed. Still, Raelynn considered herself fortunate to have survived the poor conditions and the scarcity of food; her mother hadn't.

"You're up early, my sweet."

Straightening with a gasp of surprise, Raelynn glanced back along the veranda from whence the deep, male voice had emanated and found her husband strolling leisurely toward her. Apparently he had ventured past the open French doors of her bedroom while she had still been asleep, no doubt to observe the progress

of the carpenters from the far end of the portico, a favorable spot from which to view the building site. He wore no shirt or shoes, only sleek taupe trousers that accentuated the muscular trimness of his hips and waist. His short, raven hair was wet and wildly spiked, evidencing a recent washing that was further confirmed by the linen towel hanging about his bronzed neck.

Perhaps it was just another dreamy fantasy she was having about the man who had whisked her out of the path of a swiftly approaching four-in-hand shortly after they had collided quite by accident on a boardwalk in Charleston, but Raelynn thought he looked especially virile this early morning hour. No doubt his abbreviated garb lay at the root of such a premise, for the man had been gifted with a most excellent physique. His shoulders were remarkably wide, his arms admirably wrought with lithe muscles, his darkly furred chest broad to just below his male breasts, from there tapering downward nicely along firmly fleshed ribs. She knew well enough that beneath those crisply tailored trousers, his hips were narrow

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enough to be envied by a woman. He was an active horseman and, on a regular basis, sparred with several of his close friends merely for the sport of it. As a result, his muscles were well honed to a vibrant hardness.

Though his hair was as black as ink, he was not a man who was naturally swarthy or excessively hairy. His chest and loins bore the heaviest matting, his forearms and long, lissome legs only a light layer, his back and shoulders none at all.

His features were noble: his jaw crisply chiseled beneath warmly burnished skin, his nose lean with a subtle aquiline curve, his chin slightly cleft. Whenever he smiled or thoughtfully pursed his lips, twin indentations appeared in his tautly fleshed cheeks as a vague form of dimples that, along with the beauty of his darkly translucent green eyes, never failed to capture the attention of young ladies everywhere. His lop-sided way of grinning could be termed lethal in regards to stripping away a woman's resolve. Raelynn had found herself no less susceptible and, many a time, had been forced to fortify her wits lest she, too, fall prey. In all aspects, her

husband was an exceptional specimen of the male gender.

If she had been a wife in actuality, Raelynn would have yielded to a strengthening desire to sweep a hand over that firm expanse of sinew, muscle and crisply curling hair that constituted his chest, much as she had done on their wedding night when she had first viewed him without hindrance of clothes and had been awestruck by his manly grace and beauty. But then, it would hardly have surprised her to discover that since that time she had become more than a little besotted with and perhaps even a bit prejudiced about a certain Southern gentleman named Jeffrey Lawrence Birmingham.

"Jeffrey, you startled me," she scolded with a nervous little laugh. It didn't help her composure one whit knowing that behind that charming mask of refined masculinity there could be lurking a disreputable rake bereft of any concern for how carelessly he used smitten young maids for his own ease and pleasure. Even after witnessing the altercation between Jeff and Nell, Raelynn realized she had cause to fear that she, too, was becoming just as sus-

ceptible, for it seemed lately that she could think of nothing else but those brief moments she had spent in his arms.

His white teeth flashed briefly in a wayward grin. "Did I now?"

The way his eyes flicked over her in a sweeping glance left Raelynn feeling as if she had just been stripped from head to toe. It was enough to bring a brighter glow to her cheeks and leave her voice less than steady. What was worse, it aroused within her a yearning for his husbandly attention and fervently wishing she could forever banish the memory of Nell to the four winds. "You're usually gone by this hour of the morning, aren't you, Jeffrey?"

"Aye, but my bookkeeper wanted me to look over the accounts for my shipping company, and I just finished them this morning. It's always tedious work, and I decided to spend a few leisured moments relaxing before making the trip into Charleston." He canted his dark head at a contemplative angle. "And what of you, my pet? Are you normally up this early?"

Raelynn blushed, knowing that in contrast to his early morning risings, she probably seemed like a sleepyhead. The

French doors of her bedroom were usually left open all night to allow the cooler air to enter its confines. Though no sound had disturbed her, she had roused from sleep enough times to have become cognizant of the fact that it wasn't at all unusual for her husband to roam the gallery just before or shortly after daybreak, leaving her no other choice but to assume that he was well acquainted with her habit of sleeping fairly late. "The hammering woke me."

The hand she clutched to her throat trembled slightly, in part from an inexplicable excitement that his presence never failed to evoke within her, and, perhaps in similar degrees, from a troubling suspicion that she was weakening like some mindless twit to a libertine's subtle wiles. If she had her wits about her, she wouldn't wait around for him to rend her heart. She'd turn tail and run. It was pure folly to subject oneself to temptations that with each passing day were becoming more difficult to resist. Indeed, the only thing that had thus far kept her from avidly pursuing a consummated marriage was the niggling fear that Jeffrey Birmingham wasn't nearly

as honorable, noble or gentlemanly as he seemed on the surface.

More often of late, her heart seemed torn asunder by two choices, both of which at different times seemed rational. One was driven by a growing desire to become his wife in actuality; the other, based on fear and suspicion, to abscond with her virginity intact before she fell victim to his deceit. Yet when she mused on the latter option, a miserable emptiness settled within her vitals, leaving her feeling drained, and she'd find herself struggling against a volley of tears, both strong indications of his affect on her and her reluctance to leave him.

The tumult raging within her seriously jangled her nerves, and as much as she would have preferred otherwise, Raelynn feared that she was behaving like some bedazzled young miss infatuated with an older man. Jeffrey was indeed that, being a score, ten and three, and her senior by four and ten years, which made her even more wary of his appeal. What could a mere girl do to fortify herself against the persuasive charm of a man of experience?

Certainly a few moments in his presence