She had been cold for so long. Even when she was on fire with anger at Rhett’s words, it was only ever met with cool placidity or a jeer that dumped ice on her and made her eyes sting with bitter tears. She didn’t even know when it had started, this blood-freezing cold. It had taken her a long time to realize how it had settled into her bones, until they felt as if they could shatter at a slight touch. Sometimes it seemed that she had been cold forever. She had been too hungry and scared at Tara to notice, too tired and worried while she had been married to Frank—there was never enough, could never be enough money, because however much her father had had, it had all gone in an instant, too—to feel the snow in her veins. Only on an occasional ride to the mills, and then after she had married Rhett, had her heart known spring again, and then that had gone, too. She missed him, because he was safety, and he was not cold, he was so warm.

But Bonnie had come, and Ashley had suggested, and she had thrown away the comfort and the heat of Rhett, and she was more unhappy than ever before, and she was so, so cold. Rhett’s teasing was no longer warm and gentle, prickling her and then quickly soothing. Now it lashed and cut, and why should that be, when she had never mattered to him before? She was cold, and Rhett was either cold or mean now, and she missed him. Missed how it used to be, when he
listened to her, made her worries seem small and insignificant, cheered her up, and held her in his arms. At night, she burrowed under down comforters, and still found no relief. The flashburn of brandy was no substitute for the security and warmth of Rhett, and she knew everything was sideways, but she didn’t know how to fix it. Nothing she did now seemed to bother him. It was as if the cold inside her had gotten inside him, too.

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He had been angry for so long. Angry that society dictated that its liveliest, most wonderful belle practically die at seventeen because she was now a widow. That he had left her on the road to Tara, even if he couldn’t bring himself to regret fighting for a lost cause. That she had tricked him in the jail, that Wilkes had let her come to him at all, and that his helplessness had forced her to marry Frank. The fire had raged in his heart for so long, sometimes it seemed as if he’d been angry forever. Only when she said yes—say yes, damn you—had the flames banked. For two and a half years, only embers of his madness served to remind him of that wildfire. He waited, and tried to be patient, and gave her everything she asked for. And he didn’t feel angry anymore.

But Bonnie had come, and Ashley had suggested, and Scarlett was such a fool, and she had thrown away his love. If she didn’t want him, he could damn well make sure she knew that he didn’t want her. Gone was the tenderness and gentle teasing. She thought him coarse? He would show her coarse. His impotent fury had flamed higher and hotter than ever before, and it burned, blistering his soul. He allowed it to scorch her, too, because she had asked for this. How dare she?

Only Bonnie saved him, a tiny life raft in this ocean of spite and vengeance. The anger cooled every now and again, until he could stand to be in the same room with his wife, and behave with perfect indifference to anything she said or did. Ostentatious she could be, even downright vulgar—it mattered not to him.

And then Ashley Wilkes had to get another year older.

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He was not surprised when Archie told him. As long as they had lived in Atlanta, especially since they had stopped living as man and wife, it had only been a matter of time. Scarlett could never resist an opportunity with Ashley, and Ashley, damn him, could never resist Scarlett.

For all the man’s lofty and high-minded ideals, when faced with a woman of intoxicating vitality and warmth, he just could not resist, never mind that he was married, and so was she. Rhett knew he and Ashley were alike in that particular way, unable or simply unwilling to... abstain—especially from the onslaught that was Scarlett. But they had both had their chances with her; Ashley squandered, and Rhett had taken his—because he knew her, in a way Ashley never could. Stuck up there in the clouds, Ashley only saw that Scarlett was sweet, fierce, and different, never bothering to know what made her all those things, or caring that if she was sweet, it was because she wanted something. That if she was fierce it was because she had been able to rely on no one—Ashley included—but herself for too long a time, at too tender an age. And that what made her different were things Ashley would never respect if he could understand. Still, she trailed after him, because the hapless Wilkes could not or would not break away. Rhett sometimes wondered to himself if Ashley was flattered by the attention, or if he was even aware of just how deep Scarlett’s feelings ran. He understood her so little; did he even understand himself? Or did he succeed in cloaking his lust for another man’s wife in the noble mantle of love and friendship, even to his own mind?

Rhett had thanked Archie, evil little busybody that he was, running to the wronged husband to heap blame on the wife. It was always a wife’s fault, and Atlanta would be sure to scorn Scarlett ever so much more than Ashley, never mind where the actual fault lay. It infuriated Rhett to know that society would censure Scarlett far more than Ashley for this episode, even as he admitted to
himself that he was doing the same.

He had been angry for or at Scarlett for the better part of the last ten years, and when Archie told him with that malicious glint in his eye, Rhett gave in to the fire. His black rage swooped around his cool perceptibility, hiding reason from his own mind. He was furious because she was ruining Bonnie’s chances, and hurting his not inconsiderable pride. That was all. She was destroying Bonnie’s future, she had already destroyed theirs, and he wanted to destroy her.

For a man who had often prided himself on the cool control of his more violent emotions, the dizzying power of this rage was exhilarating. He had watched all evening as she clung to his sleeve, his suddenly lily-livered tigress. The redoubtable Ashley had similarly clung to Melanie’s shadow, a more worthless man Rhett had never seen. God, they deserved each other. Each other and the misery they would feel as soon as they spent enough time together to finally understand each other.

And there she sat, on an uncomfortable, fashionable, hideous dining room chair, his cowardly little pet, unflinching at his words. Until she tossed her head and informed him that what she and Ashley shared couldn’t be understood by the likes of him. He could take her bravado and her cowardice, but he could not take her condescension. Not when he was the only one who understood her, and still loved her, anyway—loved her because he understood her, and if she hadn’t tried so hard and for so long to understand Ashley’s ridiculous noble ideals, maybe she would have understood that.

He didn’t even realize he was speaking, saying words to that effect, until she stopped and blinked owlishly at him. What had he said? The fog of alcohol made it impossible to remember. He only knew that his heart stopped when she looked at him like that, like a girl who had lost her way, and he wanted to take care of her once more.

Then she ran, ran away to the room where she longed for and dreamed of Ashley, and there would be no dreams of Ashley tonight. She was his, and he would be the only man in her bed tonight, in her head, the only man. He wanted to press himself inside her and stay forever, wrap himself around her. Wrap her up inside him, where she had always been, and just maybe wrap himself up in her, so that even when he left, she would still carry him in her heart.

She screamed, muffled against him. She should be afraid. She mustn’t be afraid. Pride, anger, desire, and anguish all melted together. The fire blazed, and he wanted to sear her with it, with himself, to burn Ashley into nothingness once and for all.

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She was not surprised Rhett knew—that Archie had told him, the malevolent little gnome. As long as they had the mills, it had only been a matter of time, she supposed. Except since she had set up her cold, empty bed as a monument to loving Ashley, there had only been this one. And what a time for them to be discovered! When she had felt nothing, except the comfort of old friendship! It was all so unfair. She had grown up with Ashley—why should they not be able to embrace as they remembered all their friends who had died so needlessly?

Of course Archie had told Rhett—and she had to admit, even while she hated him violently for it (oh, no one understood—no one!) she at least felt a grudging respect for his plain dealing. She could contend with outright talk more than Mrs. Elsing’s or India’s spiteful, pernicious whispers to everyone except the people involved. Although she did not know how, exactly, she would manage it. She just would. Ashley could tell his sister to go to Halifax, or Rhett could laugh them all to the devil—he had never cared what gossips said!—or… well, she would simply find a way. She always did.
As the carriage had approached the little house on Ivy, the tiny frost particles within her fingers and toes gathered to become one large block of ice sitting squarely in the middle of her stomach. She could not face Melanie. There was nothing to this afternoon with Ashley, only memories, but there were those other memories, of times when there was more to their embraces. Kisses that watered a near-starved love. Arms that held her too tightly, and yet too lightly, because he always, always recalled himself and Melanie. Melanie, who had been by her side through so many of her life’s most arduous campaigns. Melanie, who would finally see through Scarlett and ask her to leave her home. Oh, she could not bear it. Let India be hateful, and Mrs. Elsing look imperiously on her. Not Melly.

Stepping down from the carriage, her trembling fingers brushed Rhett’s sleeve. She hadn’t meant to touch him. She was frightened of him, had been since he jerked the strings of her corset—pity it isn’t around your neck—but two unexpected things had happened. First, he brought his arm up so that her shaking hand rested there. She gripped the fine material and felt the heat of his skin through the layers. Her fingers closed around that solid warmth. His hard gaze glittered strangely, and she found strength in its very inscrutability. She could bear everyone’s condemnation—even Melly’s.

Then, second, the small party had gone quiet, and she heard the quick steps—what a lovely dress darling… will you be an angel and receive with me?—and the block of ice shattered, each splinter driving directly into her heart. Indignation would have been one-tenth the weight of this steely, sweet, indestructible love.

She had spent the party at either Rhett’s or Melanie’s side, somehow finding strength to bear more of Melanie’s attention whenever she spent a minute next to Rhett’s grim countenance. There was no strength to be found in Ashley, her heroic golden boy, suddenly vanished into gray. As she took the pins out of her hair, she felt a mad urge to laugh; how could she have thought that he would explain it all and laugh every meddling nuisance out of his house? If she hadn’t stood next to him in that terrible receiving line, she wouldn’t have even known he was there. He had done nothing, said nothing to dispel rumor, hiding instead in his wife’s voluminous skirts. Melanie’s grace had humbled Scarlett, chafed her because it was so undeserved, but it seemed to have wasted Ashley. Like a cube of sugar in her hot tea, it was as if he’d just dissolved.

And Rhett had stood there like granite, silent and hard and unmoving, just daring anyone to speak to him about his wife. He was solid and real, exactly the opposite of Ashley. Of course, her heart reminded her quickly, he had nothing to be ashamed of—but then neither had Ashley!

After an age at the party, greeting guests and eating a piece of cake that may as well have been made of ashes, Rhett had sent her home, and gone God only knew where. Oh, how could she face him? She had somehow got through this terrible evening because of him, but she knew the moment of reckoning crept ever closer. She needed fortification, and so she made her way downstairs.

She sat in one of her beloved, fashionable dining room chairs, her toes digging into the carpet so that the plush seat would not slide her off. How many times had a guest, after too much imbibing, done just that, while Rhett jeered at the man’s inability to hold his liquor? Cold shame and sickly fear swamped her, and she could do little besides concentrate on staying seated. His hands came to her shoulders, blisteringly hot and biting into her flesh. Then they were under her hair, pressing the sides of her head. Thoughts and memories darted in and out of her head, too quickly to catch most of them. He had played with her hair on their honeymoon. This was nothing like their honeymoon. She wished they could go back to New Orleans. Almost everything had been right there. Nothing was right here. They would never go back, now. She had missed his hands. She missed his hands. She would not let him touch her.
Without knowing how they got there, she was pinned against the wall, and he was laughing at her. Not the warm laughter of days long past, or even the uproarious laugh she hated for being directed at her—the one she heard when she said the first thing that popped into her head, and proved she was not a lady. This was a merciless laugh, of a man pushed to his breaking point. Who found nothing amusing, but whose only other option was to destroy something. It was a laugh of vicious disappointment, not unlike her own earlier, at Ashley’s total fecklessness. Why was Rhett so disappointed? It frightened her, this laugh. And then he wasn’t laughing anymore, he was speaking hushed, dark words that burned themselves into her soul—and I know you, down to your bones—she fought the shiver racing through her, turning her spine to water. He loved her? But…

She could not process anymore. The day’s exhaustion and the alcohol had blurred all the edges, and she couldn’t grasp what he was trying to tell her. He leaned away from her, and she ran. To the cold comfort of her bed, where maybe she could sleep and then try to understand everything that had happened to her today. And then he was next to her again, wrapping himself around her. She couldn’t think, she couldn’t breathe. He had never been like this, and she did not know what it meant. She screamed, and he turned her in his arms. His lips pressed against her, scorching her skin. He was shaking—she only shook like that when she could not bear the realities of the day or the thoughts in her head, as she had earlier—and then she was shaking, too. Shivering under his rough, desperate kisses. She wrapped trembling arms around his neck.

As he raised himself over her, she pushed herself up toward his warmth, again and again. And as she fell asleep, curled around him, she no longer felt cold.

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