"You are incorrigible!" Scarlett hissed as soon as her sister-in-law had taken little Wade to his room. In one second, the girl had gone from her demure position on one end of the sofa to a glowering fury pacing the room. "I just can't believe you'd stoop so low, Rhett." So she wasn't angry enough to stop calling him by his given name. "Oh, don't you dare laugh!" And the last word was punctuated by a thin book dropping onto his lap.

In his defense, he hadn't been laughing. There might have been a smile, true; Scarlett tended to blow things out of proportion. "Good aim, my dear."

The girl didn't even have the grace to blush at the endearment term. If anything, it made her angrier. "I was aiming for your head," she said sulkily and dropped back on the seat the older girl had just vacated.

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The seat closest to him, too. Poor Mrs. Wilkes had been flustered at having to sit so close to him; but with Scarlett coming in first, head held high and an icy look in her eye, and choosing the other end of the couch, Ashley's wife hadn't had much of an option.

Rhett leaned forward, picking the book with one hand while he lighted his cigar with the other.
He hadn't been able to smoke until now, with Wade Hampton climbing into his lap as soon as the toddler saw him. "I take it you are returning my good bye gift," he tutted. In his last visit, he'd waited until Aunt Pittypat retired and Melanie was called into the kitchen. Then he'd taken Scarlett's hand, and before she could start any feeble protestations, placed this same book in her palm. "And there I thought it was a literature work that'd finally catch your attention. You didn't like it?"

"Like it?" It was obvious that Scarlett wanted to scream out her frustration, but she also knew that any unusual noise would draw Melanie back in. Not even tucking Wade in bed would stop Mrs. Wilkes if she thought that her dear sister-in-law was having an altercation with a man downstairs. "I've never read anything so vile and ghastly," Scarlett began in a low voice, glaring at the offending object in his hand. "I ought to have burned it; but I was afraid the servants might find something in the ashes." Her eyes narrowed, so that he'd get the idea of what his little trick had made her go through. "Uncle Peter is curious as a cat, you know, always poking around. Oh Rhett, how could you think of giving me that?"

Instead of answering, Rhett paged idly through the book, reading a sentence here and another there. Not an outstanding work, not by any means. But it had a sweetness to it, something he should have known better than to expect Scarlett to notice. It also was a lot more explicit than the insipid stories that passed as romance novels among women in Atlanta, and apparently those were the scenes that had awakened Scarlett's usually dormant sensibilities. "You were the one who complained of boredom, Scarlett."

"That was so you'd take me to the next hospital dance!"

She closed her mouth as soon as the sentence was out, and he did her the kindness of pretending he hadn't heard. He'd learned the hard way that she was at her angriest when she was embarrassed, and he didn't feel like being the object of her full fury so soon after his return from Europe. It'd been a long month, and the fact that he'd chosen to return to Atlanta instead of heading for safer cities still made him feel uncomfortable. Rhett didn't need her lashing out on top of his own self-berating, not today. "Did you even finish it, girl?"

This time she did blush.

Ah, his little hypocrite. Any lady in her position would have tossed the book aside at the second chapter - the scene in the barn, if he remembered correctly, the one with the miraculously soft hay. But if Scarlett had ever really considered burning it, she'd done it well after she'd read it through. And, knowing her, only after…. "You almost got caught reading it, didn't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

But those green of eyes of hers weren't lit in righteous indignation. Just the opposite, they showed her apprehension that he might discover the truth and call her on it.

Rhett considered the option and discarded it. He had weeks ahead to rile her up and tempt her back into their barbed friendship with some gift or another. But this evening he actually only wished for a quiet conversation, or as quiet as it ever got with her. "Then I guess I shall make up for my… poor choice," and he tucked the book between him and the couch's padding, so that Mrs. Wilkes wouldn't see it when she returned. "I see that it's hopeless to make you appreciate a good read," he teased. "Even I can admit defeat at such an impossible task."

Scarlett, of course, ignored everything that could be construed as a critique and focused on the first part of his response. "Really, Rhett?" A carefully practiced smile started to blossom. "You'll bring me something?"
He wondered if she stood in front of the mirror until the angle in which she tilted her head pleased her. Probably. Because Scarlett would never leave such a thing to fate. Her long white neck was stretched beautifully, displaying enough skin to make her appear vulnerable and enticing at the same time. Even her jewelry seemed to conspire with her, and her pendants jingled playfully between dark curls of hair. "Stop playing coquette and I'll tell you," he said moodily, suddenly aware that she did not strike such poses for him only.

Scarlett dropped the act with a glower. All traces of vulnerability disappeared, and her eyes told stories of what she'd do to him if only she could. Rhett relaxed; he liked it better when he knew exactly whom he was facing.

"Now you are being rude," she told him bluntly. "I wish you hadn't come back at all."

"And leave your beautiful trinkets behind the blockade?"

"Oh no. Never!" She brought a hand to her heart. "But you could fall off the bridge before reaching port," she continued mercilessly.

It never stopped to amuse him how the decorous little widow became an ill-mannered brat when they were alone. "And then who'd bring this for you?" he laughed, taking the small package from his pocket.

Scarlett's eyes widened, obviously not having really expected a personal present. He'd made sure to shower the three women in praise and the usual little gifts as soon as he crossed the threshold into the Peachtree house. And just as usual Melanie had welcomed him while Aunt Pittypat fluttered and hesitated until she called Uncle Peter for her shawl and announced she'd visit Mrs. Meade. At this time, poor Pittypat was surely being scolded by the doctor's wife for leaving her two nieces with that infamous Captain Butler.

"Oh, Rhett!" The happy cry pulled Rhett out of his reverie. Scarlett had made quick work of the wrapping and now was holding the beautifully crafted pin against the oil lamp for a better look. "It's just divine!"

He nodded, and waited for the impropriety of the situation to dawn on her.

"...but I shouldn't."

There it was. Ever since he'd seen the golden pin with the tiny emerald applications at the Parisian jewelry store, he'd known it'd been made for Scarlett. And she'd have it; it would only take a little push for her to accept it despite her misgivings. "Have I yet mentioned how fetching you look in your new dress, Mrs. Hamilton?" He'd brought the fabric three months ago. Aunt Pittypat had nearly fainted at the largesse of such gift, and even Mrs. Wilkes had frowned at the sight. But Scarlett had been ecstatic at the idea of a new dress that wasn't black, and in the end neither of the older women had been able to deny her wish. "Take this bauble as a complimentary treat."

It wasn't a bauble, and both knew it. But Scarlett was willing to pretend. "Thank you, Rhett."

"So should I jump off board on my next trip?"

Scarlett shook her head. "Not unless you come empty-handed," she laughed agreeably.

Sincere to the end, that was Scarlett O'Hara. "Then I shall remember that my welcome has boundaries," he answered. As he said it, Rhett studied her. Too focused finding the most eye-catching place to wear her new pin, Scarlett never noticed the coldness of his voice. It shouldn't have been so, because he was used to her and her antics. But sometimes, even sincerity should have boundaries.
Not that she'd ever understand that.

Temper simmering, Rhett plucked the pin from her hesitating hands and, not caring how compromising a position it was, carefully arranged the new piece of jewelry on her chest.

"Captain Butler!"

So she'd play defiled damsel now.

He snapped the pin securely into place and stood up fluidly. "Please offer my regrets to Mrs. Wilkes," he said easily as Scarlett struggled to find words for her outrage. "But urgent matters reclaim me."

Scarlett jumped to her feet, a storm in her eyes much more dangerous than any he'd faced in the Atlantic.

"And this reminds me why I'll never bring you a vase," he mused.

"You… you…. Out!" And his chest was slapped by something flatter and harder than her hand.

Right. The book that'd started all this. He took it from her hands and thought of leaving it behind, make her deal with its disposal as she best could. But she might show it around and blame him for trying to corrupt her, just to spite him. Even those in Scarlett closest circle, the same people who doubted her character, would jump at the chance of throwing another accusation at him. "I see you like emeralds better." The storm waned noticeably, replaced by vanity. "Adieu, my dear Mrs. Hamilton."

When she let him leave without protesting that endearment, Rhett knew he'd be welcome back.

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The End
04/03/09

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