

## Fire at Midnight-Scene from Chapter Four-Sebasti3n and Rachael Meet...Again!

Sebasti3n paused at the bottom of the steep ascent. He felt his horse surge toward the familiar path, sweat from the vigorous ride rising from its flanks in a vapor.

Rider and mount sprang into fluid motion, the beast's hooves churning up clods of damp earth as the horse propelled them toward his hideaway. He was pleased that he could disappear at will into the wilds of the rocky Cornish coast. The remote location suited his need for discretion and seclusion.

He lifted his head and glanced toward the tall, narrow cottage, his thoughts centered on the girl he harbored within. A movement at the window on the upper level caught his eye and he slowed the horse.

A striking young woman with flaxen hair and huge eyes set against a fair, delicately formed face sat watching him. The layer of sea salt rimming the outermost edges of the window added a wraithlike quality to her appearance.

*Rachael Penrose, on display in the window. If he had instructed she not be allowed outdoors, did it not also follow that she be kept away from the damned windows?*

A moment later, he stormed into the cottage, slamming doors and mouthing curses as he sought out Mrs. Faraday. When he failed to find his housekeeper, he opted to deal with the matter himself. He found the room the girl occupied, grasped the latch handle firmly, and burst into the room.

"Do not stand in front of the window!" Too late, he realized he had shouted it, his displeasure no doubt evident in his tone and expression.

"I did not hear you knock, sir." The soft, mellifluous voice carried a hint of rebuke.

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Rachael stared at the intruder, finding him remarkable. It was just as well she'd spoken before getting a better look at him. All coherent thought had fled the moment she looked into his dark lashed green eyes. They were an arresting contradiction of ice and the candle-spark of a strong will.

His long glossy hair, black as a raven's wing, was tied in a queue at the nape of his neck. A mustache framed his upper lip. Without it, he would look younger, yet the hard glint in his eyes belied youth. His face conveyed wariness and keen intelligence. A strong, square jaw framed his generous lower lip. He did not smile or attempt to ease the severity of his expression.

He stood tall, broad shouldered and narrow hipped, with an impression of compelling strength in his stance. *He looks like a warlord from an antique painting.* She drew a shallow, hitched breath as recognition dawned. This man was the sensual phantom from her fever dream. Had she actually kissed him? Her heart skipped a beat and hastened its pace at the thought. Warmth flooded her cheeks as mortification set in. She wasn't certain which was worse; the possibility she *had* kissed him, or the fact she could not remember it in greater detail.

"I am not accustomed to knocking in my own home," he replied.

His voice stunned her. It was deep, resonant, and unexpectedly harsh. A tremor of confusion passed through her as she registered the accented tones of his speech. Surely her host was English?

"This is your home?"

He nodded, his dark brows vivid slashes above his wide-set eyes. Unsmiling, he continued to study her.

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She took a hesitant step toward him, smiling as she extended one elegant hand. "You must be John Wyatt. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, sir." Her slim fingers gently pressed his hand. "I can never fully repay my debt to you."

Sebasti3n shrugged, using the slight movement to shake off her hand. He could not help but gawk at her. The purplish craters beneath her eyes had disappeared, and her skin was exquisite in its fairness, framed by a glorious mane of golden hair that tumbled over her shoulders and cascaded down her back.

*She looks like a porcelain doll. She looks like she would crush easily.* He frowned, ill at ease with his own musings.

She remained standing where she was, her wide blue eyes fixed upon him. He found he needed a moment to frame a reply to her remark.

"You owe me nothing," he said finally. Goaded by an irrational urge to flee the room, he crossed to the door. He paused to recover himself before turning back to her. He smiled slightly, the affectation making his jaw flex. "Except, perhaps, your companionship this evening."