



Redemption

Sarah Dickson

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Redemption

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CHAPTER ONE

Hugh leaned up against the bar at an inner London nightclub. He sipped Vodka, neat. The thump thump of music synchronised with the gyrating bodies that moved to the beat. Heat and raw sexual energy radiated from the crowd around him. The lights dimmed, then brightened to the beat, sending a kaleidoscope of erratic movements from the occupants.

Hugh caressed the naked arm of a woman as she passed, savouring the sexual energy that trickled up his arm.

She turned to face him, and her smile widened. Slightly unsteady on her feet, the woman's lips parted in invitation. His mouth descended on hers, drunk in the passion of her desire as her tongue danced with his. Her lips were soft, as was her body. She leaned into him, moulding her body against his. The flow of her essence into his groin sent a shiver up his spine. Teasing up the hem of her short skirt, he reached her panties. He slid a finger past the flimsy material until he felt her nether lips.

Such bliss.

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She gasped, breaking the kiss. Hugh drew her lips back to his, reconnecting the circuit. Just a taste was all he needed.

A shot of pure delight coursed up his arm, and over his body.

She moaned into his mouth.

Sighing, he released her. She was too carefree with her partners without protection. Not that any illness could befall him, but he preferred them to be cleaner.

The woman looked up at him in confusion before her gaze returned to her drink. Frowning, she continued on her way.

"You have a hell of a way with women," the bartender said.

Hugh stirred the vodka with the finger he pleased the woman with. "It's not an easy task."

"Another drink?"

He pushed the glass away. "No."

The bartender grabbed the glass and poured the contents down the sink.

Women were never a problem, as long as one kept a wall between passion and love. It was the only way to survive after he'd been turned.

Once he was called a vampire, but he preferred *lamia*, the Latin equivalent. It sounded less awful, and he didn't like the association to those who took blood. Most of his kind, in particular the older ones, were careful these days. They, like him, kept passions in check, leaving their victims well sated and most importantly, alive.

Suddenly, a bolt of desire slammed into him. He

gripped the bar, fighting the uncontrollable urge that raged throughout his body. Countering it quickly, he cursed. Catherine must be satisfying herself again. He reached to an invisible energy plane and felt her nearby. The nearby Common, most likely, a large park covered extensively with trees. He felt Catherine's energy as she neared her climax. Hugh distanced himself rapidly. Usually he participated, but tonight he was in a public place.

He heard loud cheering from a nearby group. A petite woman raised her glass before swallowing the contents in one go. She gave a mock bow to her friends.

Hugh hadn't seen her here before. *Why not try her?*

Between one flash of the overhead lights and the next, he was beside her. Her face looked flushed and she was rubbing her arms. *Had someone tried to pleasure her?* It was a common experience, the main reason he came here. The initial stages of seduction could be played so both parties could see if they wanted to take it further.

He cupped her elbow. Her womanly scent filled his nostrils. Her dark cropped hair shone as she tilted her chin upwards. She looked vaguely familiar.

Only when he gazed into those green eyes did he hesitate. Such sadness lingered there.

He didn't want a wounded heart, and was about to move on when she gripped his arm.

"Don't go."

It was the urgency in her words that made him hesitate. Her finger tugged at the opening of his shirt.

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With a gentle twist, she loosened a button.

His gaze raked her body. She really did have lovely dark skin. Her sleeveless top hugged her pert breasts, and the short skirt was equally provocative. When her breasts brushed his open shirt, he gasped as an electric current arced between them.

She looked up from his chest, her eyes burning with fiery passion. Her lips drew into a smile. "Do you mind?"

He felt a tightening in his leather pants, surprising him. What was happening to him? Confused by his strong reaction to her body, he didn't answer her straight away.

She repeated her question, more loudly.

"No," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She leaned closer. "I assume you said no?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'd be worried if you'd said yes."

Should I take her home?

She began to undo another button on his shirt.

His lips touched her slender neck. Pure energy seared through him, nearly bringing him to his knees. Only one woman had ever affected him like this, and she was long dead.

An uneasy feeling formed in the back of his mind, one he discarded as quickly. No woman could harm him.

Hugh leaned over and parted her lips with his tongue. He explored her mouth, tasting wine intermingled with tiny currents of energy. The kind of essence he craved trickled into his body. His finger

strayed between her thighs to the edge of her thong. She was wet, so much so he didn't need to go further. She would do.

Breathing in her feminine scent again, he released her. The separation was almost unbearable, surprising him.

Forget all that. She was clean, wonderfully so, and burning inside for him. He would savor her with each kiss, each touch until he'd taken the essence he needed.

"Be gentle," the blonde beside her said loudly in his ear. "Anna needs a bit of tender loving care. Even if it's for a night, pretend otherwise."

Hugh didn't want to appease a crippled heart. Her energy was all he wanted.

As for her name... Anna, was it? He liked to know his prospective lovers just a little.

Anna smiled. "Since you know my name, what's yours?"

He detected a hint of an Australian or New Zealand accent, but had lived in London for some time.

"Hugh."

"Very English," she said mimicking his accent.

He caressed her shoulder and an invisible arc of pure delight bolted up his arm. She felt good, so very good.

Sighing with pleasure, he placed his hand on the small of her back. Tiny rivulets of energy raced over his fingertips. "Can we go?"

"How about two?" her friend shouted over the

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music.

Hugh shook his head. One was always enough.
“Maybe next time.”

“My place,” he whispered into Anna’s ear.

Anna looked up, her eyes brimming with desire.
“All right.”

He steered her towards the exit.

Past midnight, the cool summer night air greeted him like soothing rain. Slowly the ache faded from his groin.

The thumping of the nightclub music receded to a dull beat. Pausing under a street-lamp, he tilted Anna’s chin to the light. Her eyes barely suppressed a need he knew all too well. She was hot, burning, and he was going to cool her down.

His lips curled into a smile as he imagined his hands caressing her silky smooth skin, tinged with a hint of sweat. His groin began to ache, and the warning returned. Beyond midnight, it was too late to find another woman.

Sweat trickled down his back. He was nervous. That was odd.

No matter. He’d be sated soon enough. “Come on. My place is in the village.”

They walked along the dimly lit back street towards Wimbledon Village.

“You live here too.”

The sense of familiarity returned. Maybe he’d seen her around. He’d only moved into the area six months ago so it was likely. It was important not to stay in one place too long. Five years was the limit

then he'd move again.

"What is your last name, Hugh?"

The question surprised him. *Why was she asking that? "Does it matter?"*

A hint of sadness crossed her face. "I guess this is only a one-nighter, so it doesn't."

That was odd. She wanted him badly, yet he sensed a melancholy deep within her soul, as if she needed to purge something deeper, using sex as the means.

Her friend had mentioned a crippled heart, but Hugh believed it ran deeper than that. The more rational part of him reasoned, *Who cares? She's willing.* By morning, he'd be free of this accursed need for another month.

Yet he wanted to know more about her.

Sweat glistened on her arms and naked back. He stroked the center of her back from the neck to the waistband of her skirt. A jolt of pure desire tore over his arm, down his spine and into his groin, sending him instantly hard. He quickly retracted his hand.

What was she doing to him?

He never reacted in this way to a woman. Well, not since Karla, and that was such a long, long time ago.

She wiggled her upper torso as if shaking off a spider's web. "What was *that*?"

He tried to joke about it. "Chemistry."

"If that's what happens at your touch, I'm dying to feel what you are like inside me."

This was becoming too much. He needed a distraction. "What do you do?"

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She seemed surprised at the question. "I'm an artist. Tonight I celebrated the opening of my exhibition. You should come and have a look tomorrow."

He considered it. "What sort of art do you do?"

Anna's tone became more animated. "It's mainly abstract. I take what are our deepest desires and express them in art." She paused. "Sorry. I'm on my promotional pitch now."

That's where he'd seen her. Her picture was in the front of the small gallery just off High Street. "That's you?"

"I'm made up, and this is darkness. All our illusions are at night, reality is for daylight."

"That's true," he whispered.

She ran her fingers through the length of his ponytail. "Your face is the type an artist would love to paint. Classical, like an angel. I'd like to paint you."

No one had ever offered to paint him before. He shook his head at the idea. What was he thinking? This was supposed to be a one-night stand. He caressed her shoulder, drinking in her scent. *Why not have both?* It was daring and dangerous for him to consider the idea. Attachments were always a risk.

For now, he could promise her anything. She'd not remember in the morning.

"What inspires your work?"

"Visions."

"Not unusual. Tell me what sort?"

Anna backed away. "Actually, I don't really want to go with you. This conversation is too weird by half

and I'm wondering if you're just playing with me."

Did she think he was a stalker? "I'm not into anything weird."

She took another step, widening the gap between them. "You make me feel too comfortable, although your intention is otherwise."

Her body certainly wasn't agreeing with her. In fact, her chest was moving in and out too rapidly.

"Wait a sec. You weren't exactly hiding what you wanted."

"I was celebrating. Look, I'm sure you are a good..."

Forget it, we'll start right here. And his mouth sealed hers.

Pressing her against a nearby fence, he slid his hand up her thigh to between her legs. She was so wet, even through her thong.

He whispered in her ear. "Are you sure you don't want me?"

"Do it here, if you can't wait. Others certainly have."

The suggestion both shocked and thrilled him. He looked around; they *were* alone. Even if someone did come along, the overhanging branches of the elm would shroud them in darkness.

He decided against it. "You'll not get rid of me that quickly. I like taking most of the night."

Excitement filled her eyes. "You like a long bout, too?"

The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. "Yes."

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Desperate to taste her, he trailed his tongue over her bottom lip. Teasing her nether-lips apart, he slid two fingers into her delicious wetness.

Just a quick snack would do for now.

She moaned and widened her legs.

He slid his thumb over her swollen mound, making her whimper into his mouth. Her essence began to flow into him.

So exquisite.

Her hips thrust to meet his fingers, deepening his penetration.

So much for not wanting him.

His tongue danced with hers in sync to the movement of his fingers.

Another touched his mind, joining him. It was Catherine.

He didn't mind the audience. He and Catherine were closer than lovers. A pity they no longer were. Passions tended to burn out after a century.

Touch her mind.

He tried, only to find a barrier. Why hadn't he tried before?

Probably me distracting you.

Still odd, though.

Stop thinking and give the poor woman some release.

Hugh backed away from Anna instead.

CHAPTER TWO

Anna watched the expression on Hugh's face change. That he'd backed away meant one thing; he was about to suggest they continue elsewhere.

She adjusted her skirt. Unsated, she eased past him into the light. "Are we going to your place?"

He seemed to come out of a trance.

"Or do we continue—"

He resumed where they'd left off. His lips locked over hers hungrily, while his tongue seemed to be drawing out her moans. Two fingers resumed their thrusting inside her with no effort at all. The cold rails of the fence were hard against her back.

About time. She'd worried he'd changed his mind.

A current of energy poured from her vagina, making her wetter.

Anna gripped his buttocks and arched back.

Hugh released the kiss, taking a deep breath, as did she. His face had that afterglow of someone who'd come. Weird, that. Before she could think about it further, one long deep thrust with his fingers sent her into freefall. He was watching her intently as he thrust again and again; when she opened her eyes,

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that is. Anna squeezed them shut again, visualizing her release that was so close. Her passage tightened, gripping his fingers.

She cried out. "Don't stop."

His tongue dove deep into her throat and he seemed to be sucking out her very essence. She sagged down the fence as another orgasm tore through her.

"More," she moaned into his mouth.

He continued to thrust, long and hard. *Oh, this was what she needed.*

Locked in a rigid embrace, she shuddered so violently that she nearly fainted. Wave after wave poured out of her. The unbearable urge she had been stricken with at the nightclub had begun to fade.

Hugh removed his fingers.

Incredible. How could Hugh take the need away in a few minutes? It took all night with a cock inside her and usually with more than one man, as one could rarely keep up with her.

Was Hugh going to be the answer to a major problem she had on every full moon?

His face was flushed. "My goodness. I'm usually the one who's carried away. You must have needed this badly."

Her throbbing cunt was truly sated, for now. "I did."

In the light she saw the bulge in his pants. A muscle quivered at his jaw as he followed her gaze.

She ran her finger over his fly. "I could give you a quickie here if you want, or in the park if you prefer."

"No thanks, to both offers." He didn't leave. Perhaps he liked to stay aroused for a while before he sated himself.

He gripped her hand. "Come with me and I'll make you forget everything."

What a contradiction he was. As to his offer, no way was she going to refuse. If he could get rid of these visions, so much the better. "Maybe the visions will go too."

"You mentioned them before. It's not unusual, but since they seem to be bothering you, tell me more."

Most men just grunted, said *sure, baby*, and that was it. He was genuinely interested. "They always occur on the full moon."

His eyes held her, commanding she continue. "Tell me more."

"It happened in the nightclub."

"So that's why you were flushed when I met you tonight?" He seemed to go deep in thought.

Probably thinking about leaving me here.

"We have to talk about these visions."

Would she get some answers at last? "Do you have the dreams too?"

"Yes. And it's odd that you do. I can't understand why. What exactly did you see at the nightclub?"

Was it possible after five years she'd found one of them at last? It took all her effort to curb the excitement that threatened to explode inside her. She needed to know more about him before admitting anything.

"Tell me," he repeated.

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"A blonde woman, and a man who —"

He paused, facing her. "Catherine. I think we have more in common than a vision."

So he *had* shared it.

Anna had seen the woman called Catherine many times. Sometimes with a man, at other times with a group, writhing in abandonment. The latter had initially shocked her when she first experienced it five years ago, but after a particularly bad dream of a group coupling in more recent times, she'd taken two men for the night. Men who believed their libido was insatiable ended up spent to exhaustion. They usually didn't return.

"I'm afraid Catherine likes to share her, shall we say, peaks."

"Are you saying her passion somehow affected me?"

He nodded, and they continued walking.

Relief flooded over her. It made so much sense in one way, and so little in another. Her mother had suffered similar visions and warned her there was only one solution.

Find a man to make you mortal, or ride the dreams out with any man you can.

Ride them out. What a cliché, but it had worked. Aside a fence, inside the park, wherever she could find a willing bed partner for an hour, or a night. If Hugh could be convinced to be her partner at every full moon, so many of her troubles would be over. If he were *lamia*, then that could change everything.

Soon, they reached a large double storied Victorian

home. "Is this yours?"

"I bought it six months ago. It suffices."

Near the entrance was a large elm tree, abundant with leaves.

He opened the door and turned the light on in the front room, then dimmed it.

No expert in period furniture, what she saw looked like the real thing to her. Light reflected from the surface of a large polished table, surrounded by six chairs, all ornately carved. A mahogany sideboard filled one wall. Near the window stood a large sofa covered in a fabric depicting a floral pattern in green, gold and red.

"What do you do for a living?"

He eased himself into the sofa. "Old wealth."

That seemed to fit his countenance. She imagined him owning a mansion in the country. Inside it would be immaculate, if this room was any indication.

Her gaze returned to Hugh's. His face appeared soft in this light, almost ageless. In fact, she was having trouble determining exactly how old he was. Perhaps thirty, not much older than she, but it was a guess. His hair was tied back neatly, not a stray lock out of place. His shirt was white and well cut, certainly not cheap. As for his leather pants, they seemed out of place. He'd looked more appropriate in designer jeans.

Hugh quickly crossed his legs. *Was he still suffering?* It brought a smile to her lips. She was glad she had a lasting affect on him.

"Sit beside me."

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She did so, inclining towards him.

His eyes seemed to be on fire, as he appeared to assess her body. "When did the dreams start?"

That was better. She could concentrate again. "I was eighteen when they began." She didn't tell him that her mother had been devastated. She had hoped Anna would grow up normal.

She swallowed before continuing. "Initially, it was easy. I had a steady boyfriend who liked it frequently."

She still remembered his beautiful face, full of love. He wanted to help her, but in the end, he couldn't take it. "After a while, he was sick of being used on demand at the full moon."

The hurt had reduced to a dull ache that still lingered ten years on.

He nodded. "Keep going."

"I found my art took the worst of it away. It was only when I turned twenty-three that it was time to come to London and face my demons, rather than hide from them."

He winced.

Did he feel that way, too? Hope soared within her. "It's like a disease that refuses to go away."

"Tell me *exactly* what you saw tonight," he said gently.

"A beautiful blonde-haired woman, I assume Catherine, pleasuring a man with her mouth." Anna could still recall her ethereal face, almost angelic.

A lot like yours.

He leaned forward. "Does the word *lamia* mean

anything to you?"

Her heart skidded before regaining control.

"It's Latin for vampire, and there are two types; those who prey on the life essences of others either by blood, or from sex."

"You know quite a bit," he said, intrigued. "Is there a particular reason why?"

"General interest."

He leaned forward, enveloping her with an invisible web. "I think it's more than that." His eyes compelled her. "Tell me."

She couldn't lie even if she wanted to. "I've met a *lamia* before. I think you're one."

He nodded as if her revelation was expected. "The latter is what we are. We can walk in the day, eat food and drink wine."

A full-blooded *lamia*. Not a half-breed as she was. There were others after all. No wonder her mother had suggested London to be the best place to find one.

"Tell me more about yourself. Anna."

"My mother is a *lamia*, I mean...was."

The pull he held over her shattered. She nearly fell backwards from the sudden release. Not liking the way he was reacting, she slid off the sofa and made her way to the door.

He looked up, startled, as if wondering how she ended up there.

Slowly she opened it and slipped outside.

In an instant, he reached her side. The torment in his eyes nearly took her breath away. "Go, before I

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beg you to stay."

She ran.

CHAPTER THREE

Dawn filtered through the nearby window. Hugh stared at the ceiling, wondering why he had been so callous to Anna. The way he'd reacted to her mother was totally unexpected. Too many other memories threatened to resurface.

No. It was best to send her away.

What he hadn't counted on was the maddening erection that refused to go away.

"Hugh."

He leaned to one side. His dearest friend stood at the doorways, her blonde hair tousled and green dress torn. All her clothes ended up that way after a full moon. Her tastes had always been unusual. Around her neck was a red gem. He knew she used it to sustain a lover during the night.

"Catherine. When did you get home?"

"About five minutes ago. I had a bit of a wild night. Being taken fully by a man is soooo wonderful at times."

She played a dangerous game in doing that.

"I know that look. I'm careful. They always use condoms, just in case I get too sentimental and want

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to give back to them."

Her gaze shifted to the bulge beneath the sheets. "It's been a very long time since I've seen you aroused. Anna has made quite an *impression* on you."

It was no laughing matter.

She reached his side and sat on the bed. "There's something different about her, Hugh, and you're a fool not to pursue it."

Catherine had been trying to pair him up with a woman since Karla died. Another permanent relationship was the last thing he needed. It was far too dangerous.

"You know why," he said.

"Something about Anna feels different to me."

"So it should. She told me her mother was *lamia*, but no longer is."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Where's her mother now?"

"I didn't ask."

He adjusted the torn material of her dress on her shoulder. He loved the way there were no secrets between them. It helped the decades pass more easily. "I told Anna who we are."

Catherine's hand cupped his. "It's best she knows the truth. What is odd, though, is why she didn't seek us out sooner? Maybe she prefers to be careful before she opens her mind to us."

"One flaw in that."

"What?" she asked, releasing him.

"We can only take. Anna gave, and gave to me."

"Oh, I forgot that. She really is an enigma, isn't

she?" Her hand hovered over the sheet, pausing above his erection, sending a jolt of pure fire over his body.

"And you're suffering terribly as a result. Here, let me."

She cupped his erection through the sheet. The fire eased in one long, delicious shudder.

Her face was flushed as she removed her hand. "A pity I can't do more."

Feeling much better, he leaned over and kissed her briefly on the lips. "What a shame we can't give and take as we once did."

Catherine's face darkened. "I'd rather not be reminded."

Why had he mentioned it after so long? It had been his fault, after all. "Sorry."

Catherine squeezed his hand. "I forgive you. Now back to Anna. If her mother was *lamia*, what about her father?"

Why these questions? "I was not in the frame of mind to ask."

"It's interesting, don't you think? It's like she's a *lamia* in reverse. She gave you so much that you became too full."

"That's not possible." But it was. Anna was proof.

Catherine always liked a mystery. "Her mother became mortal. Do you have any idea how incredible that is?"

It meant that true love had saved her mother from eternity. "What a risk she took."

"Anna must have been conceived during the

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transformation, but—”

“It must have happened before the change was completed, or Anna would be completely human,” Hugh finished.

Conception was supposed to be impossible for a female *lamia*. Only when she turned fully mortal could it happen.

What had gone wrong?

Catherine nodded slowly. “Anna shouldn’t exist, but she does.” The sheets on the bed rustled as she rose. “It’s up to you to pursue this.”

Why should he? What was Anna to him besides a form of release? “Are you serious?”

“She’s one of us and we can’t abandon her, no matter how you feel about meeting her again.”

“What if she doesn’t remember?”

“She’s not all human, so she will. Look. If you don’t want to see her again, then at least show her what alternatives exist.”

“Like the healing? Are you mad? It can be more dangerous than full-on sex.”

“I heal occasionally when I can’t find a suitable lover, as have you. She has a right to know all the options, should you decide to abandon her.”

He winced. That was what he was torn with doing.

Catherine patted his cheek. “Promise me you’ll see her again.”

He nodded.

“Good. See you later on, brother.”

Brother. He chuckled. Probably was, in a strange sort of way.

They had known each other for a century, since both of them had been turned. Shuddering, he recalled that fateful night.

* * * *

The English Lord was called Sebastian. They'd met at a masked ball the previous night, and the invitation had been delivered to Hugh's hotel room the very next day. He was sure it was directed to Catherine, for the man hadn't been able to take his eyes off her all evening.

Catherine accused him of jealousy and threatened to go without him. Having recently become Catherine's lover, he knew the risks. She liked to share her men around and that had taken Hugh some time to come to terms with.

It had been a hot night full of laudanum and too much wine. Friends and strangers had fallen under some kind of spell that night.

Only when he saw Catherine naked on the sofa with her legs around Sebastian's head did he realize what Sebastian was doing. The man was also naked. Hugh thought he'd be disgusted, but deep down it had aroused him. It was only when Catherine whimpered that he became aware of Sebastian's cock. It remained flaccid. Surely the man would show some reaction. His own member stirred just watching.

Hugh fought down resentment and his desire as Catherine writhed beneath Sebastian.

Unable to watch any longer, he tore his gaze away.

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The room, once full of people holding wine and conversing, was soon reduced to tangled bodies in various states of lust. Their noises filled the room. Never had he been in such an environment like this. Mesmerized, he continued to watch, and as he did so, felt his member become rock-hard.

A slender hand slid around his waist, breaking the hypnotic state that had gripped him. He spun around and found Catherine. She sagged into him.

"That was unbelievable," she said, before passing out.

Hugh caught her in his arms. Hoisting her up, he carried her to the nearest sofa. Sebastian sat at the far end, one leg crossed to hide his manhood.

"What did you do to her?" Hugh snapped.

"She'll recover by the morning." He leaned closer, his dark eyes gleaming. "Do you want to know how to satisfy a woman like that?"

Hugh had few lovers before Catherine, but her cries of pleasure had torn deep. He felt inadequate compared to Sebastian.

"It's beyond the abilities of a normal man. It's all in the taking of essences."

Hugh frowned. "I don't understand."

Sebastian placed his hand over Hugh's, and a jolt of electricity passed between them. Hugh's member became even harder, painfully so. It disgusted him, for he abhorred any act with a man.

"There is a price, unfortunately." He patted his own flaccid member. "I don't get aroused, but I do gain incredible satisfaction from taking her essence."

Had he heard the man right? "Do you mean you can't—"

Sebastian stroked Catherine's tousled hair. "Take her completely?"

"Yes," he stammered, glad that Sebastian couldn't.

"If I did, two things could happen. She would turn into what I am and her desire would be insatiable, or she could make me mortal."

Hugh couldn't believe he was having this conversation. Was Sebastian truly an immortal, or a frigid man who liked an elaborate charade?

Why not humor him?

"If you are unable to have real sex, what is the point?"

"You think all pleasure is obtained from your cock? I can achieve far greater satisfaction in taking her juices that I'd ever be able to inside her."

"If she becomes immortal, what then?"

"She will give you great pleasure for a long time."

Hugh didn't want to discuss it further. All he wanted to do was clothe Catherine and get her away from this awful place.

His eyes blazed into Hugh's. "Lie down and remove your breeches. Let me show you what you'll experience."

Hugh could not believe what Sebastian had said. "No."

"All right. Wait until morning and I'll make the offer to Catherine."

Hugh was not going to stay a moment longer. He lifted Catherine from the sofa. He hadn't seen it

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coming, when a sharp pain to his head forced everything to go blank.

* * * *

The light of his room returned. Hugh opened the window of his bedroom, letting the air in. Already the memory began to fade.

A hand touched his shoulder. "I saw you relive it," Catherine murmured.

She had read his mind again.

"You've never truly forgiven me, have you?"

He'd wanted to wrest her from Sebastian's arms, and there had been only one way. Be changed by Catherine, as Sebastian had changed her.

"I was desperate to have you at any cost. I never knew the repercussions," Hugh said sadly.

"Nor did I in losing you, but it's too late now." She inclined her head towards the window, strode over and opened it. "Look out there. It's a beautiful day. Go and enjoy it."

She was right. Nothing could erase a century old mistake. He breathed in summer scents from flowering shrubs. It was going to be warm today.

Stepping into the shower, he considered what to do about Anna. Maybe a visit each month with a day either side of the full moon would not be so bad after all. It would certainly ease both their needs and save the problem of finding other partners. *Why not go to the gallery and suggest the idea to her.*

Hugh dressed in a white, loose shirt and baggy

jeans. He tied his damp hair back.

Outside, the midday crowds were thick. He touched a woman's arm as he aided her across the street, followed by a gentle grip on a man's shoulder as he answered directions. He knew he left their skin tingling. They'd forget for an instant, shake their heads and be off, the moment forgotten.

Not to him. The experience lingered.

He found the gallery down a side-street and grabbed a flyer from the table just inside the entrance. The colour photograph of Anna did her justice. Her dark cropped hair, green eyes, and heart shaped face were as he remembered. Her full name was Anna Trezise.

A woman brushed past him. He caressed the small of her back as she apologised. The look of surprise on her face soon faded.

Passing a couple chatting, he entered the main room. It was blessedly cool with air-conditioning running. This room was full of hushed whispers. He could never figure that out.

He skimmed over a couple of the paintings. *Not bad, not bad at all.*

Abstract art with a sense of depth that came from someone who'd touched forces beyond the living. He stopped at one of her works, mesmerised. She'd captured the oak trees and brooding mist perfectly, but there was more. He stepped back and saw lovers entwined so completely it was impossible to determine where the man began and the woman ended.

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He checked the title.

Merging.

A cough behind him made him turn around.

The old man adjusted his glasses. "Weird, isn't it."

"Not at all," his female companion said.

The scent of death pervaded his nostrils. Instinctively Hugh brushed the woman's arm. Her energy was low, very low. A faint shadow surrounded her aging body. She had a disease, one he could bring into remission if he dared to do so in public. One of the few times he could give, rather than take.

His knees threatened to give way as he contemplated trying. Why did he care what happened to this woman? His gaze returned to the painting.

More images appeared as he stared. The trees were painted in layers from dark green through to indigo. Branches seemed to appear from nowhere, extending to the full moon as if calling it to bathe them in its brilliance.

"Incredible," Hugh whispered.

The woman seemed mesmerised by the painting. "I see two souls entwined in a moment of bliss."

The old man grunted. "I don't see anything at all," he then said.

Hugh was dumbfounded. Did Anna have any idea what she had created?

Separating from the couple, he looked again from a greater distance. A flash of dark hair in his peripheral vision made him turn. It was Anna. She stood beside an elegantly dressed woman. Opposite was a pale-

skinned woman in a black dress.

No doubt, they were negotiating a deal.

Anna's green eyes held his, mesmerised. A faint smile on her lips came and went.

From one heartbeat to the next, Hugh's cock began to stir. He had to possess her again, and soon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anna imagined Hugh's hands stroking her thighs while his tongue danced inside her vagina. She pressed her legs together.

What was he doing to her?

A lethal calmness filled Hugh's eyes, causing a tingling sensation over her skin, making her heart leap to her throat.

She could feel his need from here, intensifying the sensation between her legs. As Hugh looked away, the burning receded.

Thank goodness for that. She was having trouble concentrating on the deal.

"Five hundred pounds as agreed," Miranda, her agent, said to the woman standing opposite.

Opening her purse, the woman removed a bundle of hundred pound notes. "Can I take it now?"

Miranda flicked each note between red painted fingernails. When done, she looked up. "Of course you can. Come with me and I'll arrange packaging."

Free of customers for the moment, Anna wandered to Hugh's side. He seemed intrigued by the painting.

Hugh wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "It's

brilliant."

She knew what it really depicted, but had hidden it in hope that she would embrace her inner demon and be freed of these desires every month.

He planted a brief kiss on her lips, nearly drowning her senses. The feeling of arousal that simmered below the surface returned with a vengeance.

"I want you again, Hugh," she whispered in his ear.

"I have a proposition that may satisfy both of our needs," he whispered back.

Her heart leapt. Was he going to suggest they meet very month?

He looked over her shoulder. "Your agent?"

Miranda's face held amusement as she approached. Anna could imagine what she was thinking. *You need a good fuck, honey.*

Hugh would have the stamina for it, too.

A gentle nudge from Hugh propelled her towards Miranda. "Tell her you'll be out for a while."

Miranda reached her side. "Hmm, looks like he fits right in as an artist. Is that what he does for a living?"

"Old wealth."

Hugh's lips curved into a smile. *Surely he couldn't hear their conversation from this distance.*

Miranda shrugged. "Not all of us are so lucky."

The ill-looking woman who'd lingered before returned to Hugh's side. It was what happened next that shook Anna.

Hugh cupped the woman's chin, and Anna was

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convinced he was going to kiss her. She knew enough of his need to take the essence of another, but with a kiss? The merest brush of his lips over hers sent the woman into a swoon.

What felt like a caress sent shivers over her skin. Hugh was definitely causing it. Miranda didn't seem to be affected, nor the old man who strode back towards Hugh.

The woman stumbled as Hugh steadied her.

What was he doing?

The old man reached her side, concern on his face. He glared at Hugh, hooked his companion's arm under his, and led her away.

Hugh reached Anna's side. "She was too far gone, but I had to try."

"What did you do?"

He kept his voice low. "I gave. One of the few occasions I dare do so. It's also another way to control your needs."

Could she redirect the excess energy to a good cause? It never occurred to her before. Why hadn't her mother mentioned it? Wild hope raced through her at the possibility.

Her heart sank an instant later. "Is that why you demonstrated this to me?"

"It's an alternative, should you need it."

A stab of disappointment struck at her heart. He wasn't going to stick around. "Could you show exactly what you did?"

His maleness threatened to devour her. "Of course, can we go?"

"My home?"

His gaze became contemplative. "Not yet. How about coffee?"

Hugh was offering her solutions and she'd be a fool to refuse. "Where?"

"The nearest one. There's plenty to choose from."

A nearby cough made her look around.

Miranda raised an eyebrow. "Lunch?"

Anna forgot she existed. That had not happened before, to be consumed by the presence of another and ignore her surroundings. Except when she painted, of course.

Anna smiled. "We've met before."

Miranda gave a sly smile. "Obviously. Take as long as you like. You don't have to be here, you know."

Hugh cupped her elbow. "We may be a while."

The noise of cars and horns of impatient drivers shattered the relative peace of the gallery.

Hugh slipped on sunglasses. "This way."

Overhead, the thick clouds fed up with the Indian summer were about to release a lot of rain.

Hugh chose a table near the rear of the closest coffee shop. The plates of cake through the nearby glass counter looked inviting, and Anna was tempted.

He removed his sunglasses.

The waitress paused, giving him a longer look than necessary.

Hugh briefly stroked her arm, making the woman sigh. Anna's curiosity got the better of her. How could he do that?

Take. *That was it.* He took from the waitress.

REDEMPTION

One thing Anna could not do. She could only give. It tore her that she was human in some ways, and *lamia* in others.

He released the waitress' hand. She briefly gripped the table to steady herself. Picking up her notepad, she cleared her throat. "What would you like?"

"Long flat. Two."

Anna tore her gaze from the smile on the waitress' lips and returned her gaze to Hugh. His eyes briefly closed. Anna felt the charged energy as he took. He was savoring the essence from her.

Anna became more restless. How could she sense him like this? She fiddled one of her gold earrings; anything to detract from the increasing awareness of his presence.

"Anything else?" the waitress asked huskily.

He looked up, smiling. "No, to both."

The waitress glared at Anna as if she were the reason for his rejection.

Unfazed, Anna asked, "Cheesecake?" Not that she was hungry. She needed a distraction.

The waitress gave a tight smile, then left.

A breeze through the open back door brought with it the scent of rain.

He took in a deep breath. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

The sound of oncoming rain soothed the heat inside her.

Hugh leaned back into his chair. "My full name is Hugh L'Angelier."

It had a nice sound to it.

"And you are Anna Trezise."

Of course, he would have read the flyer.

"Australian or New Zealand. Mind you, last night I wasn't interested in such detail. You lived here long?"

Chit-chat. If that was what he wanted. "Five years in the village. Prior to that, Sydney."

He leaned forward, his gaze intent. "Why are you *here* to show your work? Why not one of the larger galleries in London, such as the TATE modern?"

Was he naïve or what? "I like it here. Besides the TATE's too grand for me."

"Your work is not exactly conventional."

His intense gaze became too much, like a summer heat she could get burnt in.

Leaning on one elbow he cupped his chin with his hand. "I'd like to know you better."

In what context, she didn't want to ask. "So would I."

A coffee was placed quickly in front of Anna. The waitress held Hugh's, smiling at him. He placed the tip of his finger on the back of her palm and the cup shook slightly in her hand, spilling a little coffee onto the saucer. She lowered it to the table, removed her hand and gave him a dreamy smile.

Anna tried not to squirm in her seat. Unsure as to how, she was receiving his energy again. She'd not been imagining it, and the build-up was getting worse. Heat flared between her legs. Crossing them, she hoped to stem the burning that threatened to consume her inside.

It didn't work.

His gaze left no doubt as to what he wanted.

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Unfortunately, she couldn't rely on him for this kind of release, for one day he'd leave, as they all did. A backup was needed, and the healing could be an ideal way of dissipating energy fast. He had been right in suggesting it to her.

"Can you show me how you healed that woman?"

"Give me your hand."

He placed his over hers. He felt cool, calm, unlike her heat.

His eyes brimmed with tenderness and passion. "You're burning."

The heat in her groin began to fade in a most relieving way. A small whimper fled from her lips.

Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Anna raised the cup of coffee with her free hand. Peering over the rim, she looked around. No one appeared to have noticed, too busy with their own conversations.

He released her hand. "That is what people feel when I take. As for healing, it's similar; the giving, that is. You do exactly what you did when giving to me, but you are feeding the energy into another."

So far she understood what he was saying, except for one thing. "How do I control it?"

"It's harder that you think. The trick is to control the flow, and I mean both ways. I'll need to show you that, but not here."

That meant he wouldn't be going out of her life just yet.

The desire in his eyes returned. Back on familiar territory, she knew what he was going to ask, and he did. "I need you again, and soon."

Liquid heat flowed between her legs. "That, I would like very much." She pushed her chair back. "How about now?"

"Not yet. Finish your coffee first."

Annoyed, she sat down, frustrated by the unbearable dampness between her legs.

"I need to know a few more things. For a start, what was your father?"

She had wanted to tell him last night. "He was human."

His skin went even paler.

"My mother found true love. Surely you know how that works?"

He nodded slowly. "I've never met anyone who's actually succeeded."

A flicker of hope took hold. "It took a lot of convincing by my father. It turned out she was worried about killing him. He convinced her that the risk was worth it."

"It's dangerous, and people have died. You father must have been prepared to risk everything."

She pressed further. "Wouldn't you do it for true love? I certainly would." *Idiot*. Why had she said that?

His face went hard, too hard. "I've been down that path, and plan never to do so again." Abruptly, he rose. "Are you ready?"

Her heart ached for more, but this was as good as it was going to get. "We'll go to my place this time."

"Fine by me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Hugh watched her every move when she opened the front door of a renovated double story house converted into flats. He closed it behind them.

She was perfect in form, one he wanted to investigate every inch of.

His mouth sealed hers in the hallway. Her knee-length skirt was no barrier to him as his hand slid up her thigh between her legs.

She pulled away from his kiss. "I'm not in my room."

He looked around. "Which one is yours?"

"The top floor."

He released her. "You go first."

As she climbed, he watched her skirt as it hugged her buttocks wonderfully. Such lovely legs, too.

At the first bend she paused, blushing. "You're watching me."

He licked his lips. "I'm imagining you naked."

She spun around and ran up the remainder of the steps. He reached her as she inserted the key into the lock, or tried to.

Was she nervous? He grabbed the keys from her

trembling hand. "I'll do it."

After the door closed behind them, he found the nearest wall and resumed where they'd left off.

"Protection," she murmured into his shoulder.

He teased the edge of her thong. She was so wet. What a pity he couldn't take her normally. It would be wonderful feeling her vagina clench his cock as she came.

His member hardened as the idea took form. Last night he'd believed her essence that had sent him rock-hard. Now he knew better. It was Anna. No woman had affected him so much since Karla.

Fool. It was an impossible dream.

"That's not going to be a problem." Like hell it wasn't, but she didn't need to know that.

"Why not?"

"I don't need you, er... that way."

She thrust her hips against his. "Liar."

"That means nothing. I...always go like this."

She gave an incredulous look. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," he said, hoarsely.

She didn't hide her disappointment. "So how do you, I mean...come?"

"My release is taking, not giving," and winced as he said it. It was true. Only if he found true love could he give everything to her. If he messed up, he could kill her.

As he had killed Karla.

Never again.

Anna seemed annoyed. "I don't know. I want all of you in me."

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He fought down the need to give her what she wanted. "If you want to find release each month, you'll have to trust me. You'll be equally sated."

Her eyes widened as he mentioned the word, *month*. "I can live with that." She removed her thong and flung it to one side, then her top, leaving only her skirt.

The energy from her became intoxicating and it took all his effort to control himself for a little longer.

Anna opened the door to her bedroom. "In here."

The bed was large; huge, in fact.

"Lie down," he ordered.

The startled look she gave scared and thrilled him. "You like being in control, don't you?"

He had to be. It seemed Anna didn't have any idea the power she had over him.

Her small breasts rose and fell rapidly as she leaned back on the bed. Propped on her elbows, she licked her lips. "What now?"

Ah. She wanted him to take the initiative. He could manage that. May as well make the time they had fun.

He removed his shirt and cast it aside. His jeans followed.

Hugh watched her check out his toned chest, stopping at the waistband of his shorts.

"You sure you don't want to um, do it all the way?"

"I don't need it," he insisted, trying to keep his voice level. In fact, she was bothering him greatly in just that area. His cock was throbbing.

Hugh quickly climbed onto the bed. Suckling one

of her nipples, he took her energy. Between her moans, he felt a hand stray to his rigid shaft. It jerked with a mind of its own as her fingers brushed the tip. If he could become any harder, he just did at her touch. It felt incredible sensually and he wanted Anna to do so much more, like suck him senseless, but that would mean giving to her.

With a little pressure on her wrists, he removed her delicate fingers from doing even worse damage.

He pinned her hands above her head. "If you try again, I will get up and leave you."

She gazed up in defiance. "You want me. I can tell."

"I mean it."

She pouted, not looking too happy at all. "I promise."

Hugh released her wrists and hoped she'd not be stupid to defy him. He had to make sure he could resist Anna. It was damn hard not to when she just lay there, her skirt bunched up, barely covering her nether regions.

Part of him wanted to leave right now before he began to care about her, but he'd made a promise. If they were going to meet every month, such awkwardness had to be overcome.

Hugh decided not to delay the inevitable. He parted her legs and dove into her vagina with his tongue. She gasped as her essence rapidly poured into him. All his concerns fled, as did most conscious thought as he drank from her nectar.

This was what he wanted, unabashed lust. He

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delved deeper with his tongue, feeling delicious shivers racing over her body. His tongue took from her moist passage, listening to the moans. He liked to hear a woman moan and writhe. It made the energy stronger and the feeding more intense.

He took in more energy, amazed there was so much of it.

Pausing, he looked up at Anna, who was smiling.

"You're taking it from me. I can feel it."

He gathered her energy in long tendrils, invisible to her and him, sensing its flow. He could barely breathe from the wonder of her desire.

Her thighs gripped his head as he thrust his tongue deep into her. He felt another, more powerful need threaten to take over. He desperately wanted to thrust his cock deep inside her, and see her writhing beneath him as they both came.

Why *didn't* he take up her offer of a condom? There was an element of risk, one he was prepared to take. The pleasure would be far less intense but it would be safe.

If she'd worn the gem Catherine possessed, he would have released her, grabbed a condom and done just that.

Why was he contemplating such options? He couldn't. One thing would lead to another.

Hugh had to end it, now. Better to be quick and be gone from her.

"It's like having hundreds of small orgasms. It's so wonderful."

He leaned over her, sealing his lips with hers. With

three fingers he thrust in and out, faster and faster until she froze for what seemed like seconds.

The need to give to her, release into her body grew, shocking him. He fought the need, brought it back under control.

Take. That is all you can do. It's all you know.

The need grew to a painful level.

Her face twisted in that wonderful moment of ecstasy.

Anna cried out. "Hugh. Oh, my, you are so incredible."

The energy within her was burning out at last. He'd taken far too much. He was going to come.

She cried out again, shuddering and squirming below him.

"Hugh. Please come inside me."

He released her. It was too late to enter her and find completion. "No."

Turning to one side, he cried out in ecstasy. Stars filled his vision. His body shuddered with his release.

This was never meant to happen.

A gentle caress on his back brought him back to awareness. He had to go. Forget about seeing her in a month. He'd not be able to endure this again.

And knew it to be a lie. Anna was unlocking things inside him, and part of him demanded that freedom.

Anna stroked his back. "I thought you could only take."

He shook his head, refusing to look at her.

She kissed his ear, and whispered. "I want you, Hugh, inside next time."

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Hugh could not believe her offer. Did she have any idea what had just happened to him?

Spent, he leaned onto his back and looked up at her.

Her face was still flushed, so sated. *So beautiful.* "That was not meant to happen."

"Why not?"

To tell her would admit to other feelings. "Can we talk about it later?"

She yawned. "I feel so tired. Why is that?"

Ah. She was weakening after all. "It's my taking of you."

Her hand strayed to his lips. "And you expended it again. What would happen if you came inside me? Would that energy have been returned?"

The truth? He could not tell her, but had a feeling she already knew. "Yes, in a way."

"My mother told me she had to give to become mortal. It took a lot for her to do so."

He sat up, startled. She knew so much and yet seemed to be so naïve about the dangers of sharing such a gift.

She yawned again. "I do need sleep."

Slipping a blanket over her, he waited for her breathing to become steady. Hopefully she'd be exhausted for a couple of days. He dressed quickly, saddened that he had to leave her for a month. But it had to be; once a month, but no more. It couldn't be more.

CHAPTER SIX

Anna awoke refreshed. The pent-up desire had faded to a delicious, dull throb.

She checked the time on the bedside clock: ten a.m. Since she never slept in so late, it had to be due to Hugh pleasuring her.

Poor Hugh. He'd certainly been torn in refusing to take her fully.

She had heard condoms would be safe, but he seemed reluctant with that option as well.

Why?

Did he fear he could lose his heart to her? Did she want him to, or was it the need to find a way to end these dreams motivating her?

Unless...

Was it possible he'd been terribly hurt by someone, and was afraid to try again? Or worse, had someone died?

Since he'd made it clear he'd not be sticking around, such foolish speculation had to stop. The problem was she felt a connection with him, one that she could not let go.

And she had to, if she knew what was good for

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her.

She had to forget him until the next full moon. That would be easy enough with the gallery, and by painting more works.

Anna decided to begin with the latter.

She slipped on old T-shirt and shorts, both spattered with dried paint.

In the attic, Anna lifted the large canvas onto the easel. Already painted in indigo, it meant she didn't have to bother with doing a backdrop.

Steering clear of memories of Hugh, she stood back and let her imagination wander. The image of Catherine on her knees came. Even though it was night, Anna knew her face to be flushed as she sucked the essence from her lover's cock.

Anna imagined his face twisted in that wonderful moment before orgasm. His hands teased her hair as he groaned. Catherine's eyes were closed as she cupped his buttocks, driving his cock deeper into her throat.

As she painted, Anna felt the slickness between her thighs increase. The brush strokes became more rapid, as did her breathing. Silhouettes of the man and Catherine appeared. She worked on Catherine's face, making it come to life from the deep blue background.

As the man came, Anna gripped the easel as she shuddered. Several deep breaths later, she picked up the brush and continued. Line after line radiated from the man's silhouette, through his cock, into Catherine's body. To a casual observer, it would

appear as a series of converging lines from one shape to another.

She was feeding from him, just as Hugh had done from her.

Standing back, Anna studied the work. The red lines of energy contrasted strongly with the dark blue silhouettes.

Satisfied, she placed her brush down.

A bell rang, distant and annoying. She wiped sweat from her brow. Her clothes were damp. No way could she see anyone like this.

Hopefully, whoever it was would give up and go away.

The bell rang again.

Damn.

She ran down the stairs to the front door of her flat and pressed a button on the intercom. "Who is it?"

"Catherine."

Her heart skidded into freefall. Her finger slid off the button. How did she know where her flat was? Perhaps Hugh had told her.

She took another deep breath. *Why was she here?*

Anna pressed another button. "Come up. I'm on the top floor."

Casting aside her T-shirt and shorts, Anna quickly slipped on a blue dress.

She heard Catherine's footsteps as she opened the door.

Stunning, blond and very poised. Catherine's clothes were simple—jeans and a deep blue top—but on her, they looked incredible.

REDEMPTION

"You have paint in your hair," Catherine said.

She ran a hand over her hair. Wetness touched her fingers. "I've been working on a piece."

"Please. May I see it?"

Normally she didn't like to show strangers a work in progress, but since the work was about Catherine, she nodded. "Come upstairs."

The smell of oil paint filled the room, even with the window open. She hadn't noticed it before; too engrossed in her work.

Wiping the paint from her hand with a rag beside the easel, she tried to settle the butterflies in her stomach as Catherine studied the painting.

Her smile widened in approval. "You saw us, didn't you?"

Anna blushed as she recalled the vision.

"It's all right, my sweet. I have to say it's a good likeness, and the passion is perfect."

When anyone complimented her work, she always became nervous, doubly so with a work in progress. "It's the first layer only."

Catherine ran her finger above the wet paint. "It looks fairly complete to me. See how his energy flows into me. It's exactly how I felt the other night."

The butterflies began to recede. "I'm glad you like it."

"It's a terrible habit of mine, sharing my passion. I find it hard to control my emotions from poor Hugh, and you, it seems." She took a step backwards, looked around the room. "You only work on one piece at a time?"

It was the only way to purge the sexual intensity, but she didn't tell Catherine that. "I can't start a new piece until I complete the previous."

"You're worried that the passion would be lost."

A close enough answer. "Yes."

She gave an approving nod. "I went to your gallery and looked at your other works. You dream of us on the full moon a lot, don't you?"

Anna blushed as she placed the brushes in a jar of turps. "I can't help it. You are...there."

"It's a good outlet for release. I can see that, but you want more, don't you?"

What did she know?

"You prefer a man, as I do, one who can take away these terrible urges each month."

Anna nearly sagged against the easel with relief. "I hate it, this existence."

Her eyes were gentle, understanding. "That's why I've come here."

Anna tried to steady her trembling hands. "Hugh?"

Catherine smiled warmly. "Yes. He needs a helping hand."

Was there hope after all?

Anna indicated the door of her attic. "Do you want coffee?"

"Tea."

After the kettle boiled, Anna poured water into a teapot.

Catherine sat at the kitchen table. "I've never seen Hugh so troubled."

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Anna sat opposite. "When did you see him?"

"This morning, he was quite evasive. Not like him at all." Catherine placed her hand over Anna's. "What happened?"

Anna was about to omit details when it occurred to her that there was little else to mention besides the sex. "What exactly do you want to know?"

"I've shared every sex act with him since goodness knows when, so nothing you say will make me blush."

Anna frowned. "Why everything?"

"I'll know if anything unusual occurred."

Anna had never been so frank with anyone about such intimate details, or as embarrassed. She told her exactly what happened, feeling the warmth in her cheeks increase as she did so.

"And afterwards?"

"He agreed to see me next month, but he might have reneged on that. He was very upset when he left."

A tear fell down Catherine's cheek. "He never becomes aroused around women. You've touched his heart, and he's terrified."

So she hadn't been imagining it after all. "I guessed as much."

"Don't worry. He doesn't know it yet, but he will."

The two of them must be very close for Catherine to be so sure. Anna certainly wasn't. "You've known him for long?"

Catherine wiped a tear from her cheek. "A very long time." She gave a wan smile. "I want him to find

true love again."

No one fell in love that quickly. "I doubt it's that. I do feel a connection with Hugh, but love, I...don't know."

"Are you sure? Not even a tiny bit?"

"I loved a young man who broke my heart. If I felt anything with Hugh, it would be to alleviate my suffering."

"Your eyes betray you. You see the possibility of a future with him."

The truth stuck her like a knot that had finally loosened. "Maybe you're right," still uncertain as to what she was actually admitting to.

Anna quickly filled two cups and handed one to Catherine.

She sipped her tea. "What time did you wake up?"

What an odd question. "Ten."

Catherine lowered the cup. "This morning?"

"Of course."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Saturday."

"It's Sunday."

Anna nearly dropped her cup. By the look of seriousness on Catherine's face, she wasn't lying. Why would she need to?

"My lover, if he didn't wear this," indicating a red gem around her neck, "would be asleep within a half-hour."

"That was what happened to me."

Catherine nodded. "Hugh and I usually need an hour to satiate our needs with other partners. I prefer

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a more extended bout of sex, thus the gem."

Anna had wanted to savor Hugh for longer, feel his skin against hers and enjoy the ride. All he wanted was to take her essence. Not that she'd minded, unless that was all he planned to do.

A question formed, one that seemed like a good time to ask. "What my mother never explained to me is why you need to take as readily as you do. Is it like food? That if you don't get enough you'll die?"

Catherine nodded. "It's needed like a good wine every month, and lots of it. It feels good at the time but leaves one terribly disappointed the next day. Fortunately, this gem solves the tiredness problem. When I take from a lover, I put some of his essence inside the gem. It enables him to last longer, and also takes the intensity away."

Her expression grew serious. "Enough of me. We're here to talk about Hugh. Is there anything you want to know about him?"

Anna had to get to the bottom of Hugh's reluctance. "Has he ever loved another woman?"

She gazed at the cup, contemplating. "A sad tale, that one. He loved Karla, so much so he wanted her to aid him in becoming mortal. He rushed into it too quickly. I tried to warn him to give her more time, but he was determined."

She shook her head as if remembering the conversation.

"The experience requires total melding of minds, as well as body. Any hesitation at all will destroy the connection, and the weaker of the two will die."

Anna swallowed. Her father had waited for years until her mother was ready to commit. Hugh had hinted he didn't plan to stay around that long. "My parents took a long time to get to know each other. I'm not sure how I feel about Hugh, but even if I were fond of him, he doesn't plan on staying."

Catherine's gaze went wistful. "Your parents made time. Hugh will too, if you're prepared to wait."

Did she want to consider the possibility of a future with Hugh? "I don't know how I feel."

"When time is not against you, there are decades in which to consider alternatives. Hugh is over a century old. He'll not think in terms of weeks, or even months. It could be years, if you are prepared to wait as your father did."

Her mother had never mentioned her true age. After she'd changed, she deemed it as unimportant, preferring to forget her old life as soon as possible.

"Where are your parents now?"

"Living in a remote town west of Sydney. They like the quiet life."

Resting on her elbows, she asked, "Why are you here, in London?"

"My mother was turned in London. She said I had to come here to find another who could rid me of this accursed need, or at least control it."

"She's right. It's where all of us return to, simply because it's where we were created. It's like family roots."

It then occurred to her why her mother now lived as far away from London as possible. She no longer

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needed contact with her own kind.

Not so Anna, who had craved this moment for so long. First Hugh, and now Catherine. She felt like she belonged at last. A pity it may not last.

"I know that look, and I don't plan on abandoning you. I truly believe Hugh has found the one who can make him mortal, and I plan to aid you, starting with this."

She removed the necklace and handed the gem to Anna. "It's a type of bloodstone. It was given to me by an old woman who succeeded in finding true love a century ago."

Anna stared at the blood-red crystal, mesmerized. It seemed to pulse with an inner fire.

Catherine rose. "He'll be back within the day. I know him. He'll not be able to stay away from you."

Hoping Catherine was right, Anna slipped the necklace over her neck.

* * * *

Anna was all Hugh could think about. Yesterday, he had wandered the streets thinking about her, pausing at her house before moving on again. It had been difficult returning to his bed, alone, and the night had been full of dreams of having her again. His cock had remained semi-erect ever since.

He heard Catherine enter his bedroom.

"Have you decided to see her again or are you going to continue to fantasize?" Her blush meant that she had peeked into his dreams.

Another night with a hard-on was not a viable option. "I think you know the answer."

Laughing, she walked towards him. Her expression became serious as she sat beside him on the bed. "I experienced what you did the other night. I've never felt you come with so much passion."

Normally he didn't get an erection, let alone come to orgasm. Certainly not since Karla.

Catherine placed her hand on her throat. "It sent me reeling, I can assure you. You should have seen your face when you returned."

He'd recalled returning home utterly spent, and that had never happened before. It had to be due to coming to orgasm. It had certainly rocked him senseless.

She tapped her throat, making him look twice.

Her necklace was missing.

She gave a tight smile. "I gave it to Anna to use until the next full moon."

He bolted upright in the bed. "You did *what*?"

"She's the one for you. Hell, her mother was *lamia*. Besides, Anna understands us, or is at least trying to."

How could Catherine do this to him? "I can't love her. It's too...dangerous."

"For whom? You? Would you prefer this existence?" She cupped his face. "This is your best chance since Karla, unless you want to spend another sixty years like this."

Did he want to know if it was Anna that drove him to such bliss and not the exchange of energy?

Her eyes seemed to probe his very soul. "I see

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you're thinking about it. Let her wear the gem. Give her the chance to love you back, and see what happens."

Averting his gaze, he gently removed her hands. "I can't."

"If I found a man who could love me true, I'd risk the sharing in a heartbeat."

"It's too dangerous."

She cupped his chin, forcing him to look at her again. "Do you want to play it safe? If so, continue as you are with her."

Regardless of what decision he made, he couldn't imagine *not* seeing her again.

Catherine released him. "Use protection and the gem. That way you won't accidentally give your essence to her, and she will not be so exhausted afterwards. It's what I do with my lovers."

He imagined being inside her, fulfilling an ache so deep. Such a possibility shocked him. To be so completely joined in a union that could give him mortality.

Did he dare to try?

Did he dare not to?

"I'll make no promises."

"The only promise to make is to yourself." She kissed him briefly on the lips. "You have nothing to lose."

She rose, obviously leaving him to think about it.

Hugh climbed out of bed. What could Anna lose if he were careful?

Don't be such an idiot. You barely know her. How did

you know if she's even worth the risk?

Staying here wasn't going to aid him in finding out.

Catherine would want to the gem back within the month, not a long time to decide if he wanted a life partner or not.

He dressed in T-shirt and jeans. Donning sandals, he wandered back into the kitchen. He smiled at the English adage of having a cup of tea to aid his nerves. He preferred coffee. After the kettle had boiled, he poured a cup. Pondering the decision, he let fate decide where to meet Anna again. Should it be neutral territory such as the gallery, or her place?

He saw her flyer on the kitchen bench near the door. That decided it for him.

The gallery.

When he found she wasn't there, he took the second option, her home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A faint buzzing noise invaded her work. Anna sighed. *Who is it now?*

She placed her brush down, removed her coat and went down to the intercom.

"It's Hugh."

A small gasp escaped her lips. Catherine was right when she said he'd return within the day. She pressed the security button. Moments later, he was outside her door.

Through the security hole, she could not believe how gorgeous he looked. She opened the door. "Hugh."

A jolt of electricity crackled over her body as his hand touched her cheek. "You've been painting."

She brushed her still tingling cheek, where his hand had rested. The oil paint felt like dried skin. She'd forgotten all about it.

Hugh smiled warily. "Is this a bad time?"

"Not at all, come in."

She closed the door behind him. Before she'd taken a single step back, his mouth descended on hers. His breath smelt of coffee. He pulled back; his eyes were

dark pools of smoldering desire. A finger strayed over her inner thigh. "You've come already today."

Searing heat flared up her thigh to her core, making her gasp. "It happens when I paint a dream."

"Show me."

She opened the door to the attic.

Hands on hips, he studied her work from close up, then from afar. He nodded thoughtfully. "It's brilliant."

The additions *had* come off well, now that she paused to look.

Catherine's profile was quite recognizable to those who knew her. Her hands swept the buttocks of her lover, obscuring the actual act. The impression added more allure than being too explicit.

Hugh's gaze raked her body. "I'd like you to do one of us, afterwards."

Molten fire raced down her spine, sending a surge of moisture between her legs. Her nipples hardened as her breath quickened. "One condition; you wear a condom."

He seemed to hesitate.

She removed her T-shirt, then her bra, freeing her aching nipples from their confinement. The widening in his eyes meant she still held his attention. Her nipples peaked as she brushed a finger over each of them.

Two strides later, Hugh scooped her in his arms, and carried her out the door towards the bedroom. "You are a hard woman to resist."

Anna smiled and began to toy with the chain. "I

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won't tire so easily with this."

In the bedroom, he gently placed her on the bed. "It was wrong of Catherine to give you that."

At least he wasn't backing away. "Take everything off, or I'll have to do it for you."

That seemed to work. Any hesitation that may have lingered soon fled. He pulled; the T-shirt slid over his head in one fluid motion. His jeans soon followed, leaving boxer shorts as the only barrier. And an erection that was impossible to miss.

"Everything," she ordered, licking her lips.

He removed the shorts slowly. Anna leaned back on the bed, propping herself on her elbows to get a better look. "You are one sexy man, Hugh."

Grinning, he cast the shorts to one side. Standing before her, she gave his body the once-over. His cock twitched at the attention. "Very nice."

"You still insist on a condom?"

The thought of him being inside brought a whimper to her lips. She quickly removed a condom from the packet on the side of the bed. "I'll put it on."

Anna had a lot of experience in doing this. Some of the men she'd slept with weren't as diligent as they should be. She slipped it on slowly and deliberately, stroking his rigid shaft as she did so.

He trembled as she cupped his testicles. "Come here."

Anna lay on the bed, exposing her clit to him. She began to massage it back and forth, feeling the moisture build on her hand as she did so. "I want this, and so do you."

The words barely escaped her lips when he fell onto the bed beside her. She widened her legs for him. She felt the tip of his cock against her thigh.

He rose up on one elbow. "I've been dreaming of doing this since I met you."

"Then release yourself into me. I want you to."

"I'm wary of doing so. It's not so easy to take a risk like this."

"To fuse our minds. That won't happen with a condom, will it?"

He laughed. "No, fortunately. I have to confess, it's been so long since I—"

She stroked his face, and he fell into silence. She liked the way the sadness had fled, even if momentarily. Stroking his shaft, she eased the tip of cock between her nether lips. "You're in good hands. Allow me."

Slowly her passage gave way to his size, yielding to him as he inched in deeper. She arched her hips, taking him in fully.

He gave out a long groan of satisfaction. "It's been a long time since I've been inside a woman."

She stroked his face. "And it's been a long time since I have had a man talk sense to me."

They usually uttered words that meant nothing, too intent on getting to orgasm. Anna had been no more than a rutting animal herself. This felt so different, so right.

"The necklace will dampen what we experience." He chuckled. "Right now, it doesn't feel that way."

Anna felt her heart melt at his laughter. The hard

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lines on his beautiful face softened.

Why had he become still? Not that she minded feeling him inside, but her body was screaming out for more. "Hugh. You—"

He frowned "Can't you feel the build?" And slowly eased out of her.

Panic sent in. "No."

He plunged back in.

She arched her hips towards his. "Oh, my. Again, please."

The delicious miniature orgasms returned with each thrust, sending what felt like flames all over her body.

Sweat formed on his brow.

She usually closed her eyes and focused on getting an orgasm, but Hugh's gaze refused to leave hers. It felt oddly intrusive being watched, yet satisfying as well.

Deep inside her, something uncoiled. A yearning that ran deeper than a quick need to be sated, a feeling she had not experienced for so long, and one she wanted to lose herself in.

With a shock, she discovered what it was. She truly wanted to make him whole, mortal. Give him a life that was different to what he had.

Hugh paused. "What are you thinking?"

Afraid to admit such a thing to him, she lied. "It's been a while since anyone has shown me such consideration."

"It's the necklace calming us down. If we were here last night doing this..." Suddenly he shuddered. "I

best not think of that right now."

A shot of liquid fire tore through her body.

"Imagine it again."

"Are you sure?"

"If this were a full moon, you'd be a rutting animal by now. Admit it." And thrust her hips up for good measure. She groaned an instant later as the tip of his shaft pressed against her womb. She thrust again, catching that sensitive place.

"Need some help?"

"Pleeese."

She tried to press his lips to hers but he shook his head. "I'm going to watch you cry out, then I want you to paint us afterwards."

She gasped as he thrust again. "Straight afterwards?"

"Maybe not. For now, imagine you're painting the strokes onto canvas."

"That's not going to be too hard."

"Exactly."

The build came with agonizing slowness. She gripped the necklace, wanting to tear it off, but he gripped her hand.

"Don't."

His finger strayed to her clit, rubbing her mound in gentle teasing motions.

Breathing in sharply, she watched the expression on his face begin to change. He was close, very close.

Riding a gently wave, it rose higher and higher. This orgasm, she knew, was going to be so different from the quick and unsatisfying release from faceless

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men.

"Anna," he whispered. "Don't hold out any longer. I know I can't."

Distant it came, like unexpected lightning. She tossed her head back and cried out at its ferocity.

The speed of his thrusts increased, driving the climb higher. She cried out again, beyond needing to be sated. This was for him. He needed to find release more desperately that she did, even if he didn't know it yet. She met him thrust for thrust, moaning as she did so.

She felt Hugh's body stiffen above her. He cried out as he filled her with his warmth. His ebbing cock twitched her passage with aftershocks.

He withdrew from her.

She held him after he flopped beside her. His eyes were glazed. Having him like this was wonderful. Anna imagined making love to him without the necklace on a full moon. She stroked his beautiful sweat-laced torso. If only he could be convinced it was worth a try.

* * * *

Hugh had forgotten how incredible it was coming inside a woman. Not any woman, but Anna. He wanted to have her again, every night until the full moon and share with her totally, soul and all.

Too hell with the risks.

After he sat up, the foolish notion faded. Logic returned. *It was not possible.*

"Hugh."

She smelt of sex, and him. "I want to do this again."

Hugh shook his head. He needed time to get used to all this. "What about a walk."

Anna tried not to hide her disappointment. "And the painting?"

He'd forgotten all about it. "I wasn't serious about the latter."

"I am."

He needed to clear his head and this bedroom was not the place where that would happen. "I really need to walk. If you don't—"

"How about a shower first? Together, if you want."

His cock became semi-erect at the idea.

Wearing nothing but the necklace, she opened a sliding door. "Just a wash, nothing more. I promise."

That was fine by him, too. Until he ended up in the shower with her.

The tip of his erection touched her butt, making him flinch at the skin-to-skin contact. When nothing more than a gentle current passed between them, he slid his arms around her. She smelt of lavender soap and fresh water. He nuzzled her neck, letting his hair drape over her shoulder. "Anna. May I stay tonight?"

What he had just said?

She turned around in his arms. "I'd like that very much."

"I don't want to intrude on your life. I—"

"You're not. Believe me. I want you with me."

He ran a finger over her lips. "I don't know why I

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feel like this."

Anna teased his lower lip. "Nor do I."

The tip of his cock touched her nether lips, sending a low moan from his lips. He quickly climbed out, grabbed a towel and wiped his body in quick, circular movements. The need to have her again intensified.

Anna's chest rose and fell, too fast for normal breathing. "What happened?"

He didn't want to discuss it. He placed his towel on the rack.

Her eyes widened and her nipples peaked, causing his cock to stir to full attention. As much as he wanted to have her then and there, he desperately needed breathing space.

No one, save Karla, had made him feel like this.

No. He didn't even think she had, either, now he had a chance to think.

She gripped the rail, her gaze full of uncertainty. "What are you thinking?"

Was it wise to tell her about Karla? Maybe he would, later, when sense returned. "Nothing. I'm just looking at you, which I've done too much of."

He returned to her bedroom to dress.

Anna wasn't Karla, nothing like her by a long shot.

Hugh?

He sensed her dreaminess. Catherine had participated in their lovemaking.

I checked with her family. Said I was a concerned friend who understood her problem.

You shouldn't have, Hugh protested.

Of course I should. Listen. She was conceived while her

mother changed. She is part human and part lamia. It also explains why you can't read her mind. It's the lamia part of her. The human part allowed her to give her essence to you. I've never heard of this happening before.

Nor had he. *She's unique.*

Treat her special. I'll find out more.

Catherine.

Hmm.

Thanks.

Someone had to make your future work for you. And she was gone.

"Special," he whispered.

She leaned against the door. "Who is?"

"You." And hoped such flattery would be enough, for he sure as hell didn't want to tell that he'd been snooping on her.

"So are you, Hugh. You need —"

The remainder of the words weren't hard to figure. *Need someone to look after you. "Come on, let's go."*

The midday heat was tepid. Save a few days a year, or so some of the cynics said, London rarely had too many hot days. He'd known some years where that wasn't true. Today was quite pleasant, if just a tad too humid for his liking.

He left his hair loose, letting it dry.

They passed the small lake, adjacent to Wimbledon Common. A dark haired boy was throwing bread into the middle, attracting the ducks. A woman sat on a nearby blanket, watching him. A man stroked her arm.

He tore his gaze away. Was that what he wanted?

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Anna didn't seem to notice. Most likely too preoccupied with how to look after him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Anna had visited Wimbledon Common many times to paint, and more often than not to wander the forested areas. A sense of peace lingered within these old trees, reminding her of the English countryside. During her wanderings, she forgot this was the centre of London. Only when she reached the main riding trails did the rumbling traffic in the distance remind her of where she was.

It was odd walking with a companion. Hugh was entering a place that was her private world. It also reminded her how alone she'd been for the last five years.

She took him to a more remote part, deeper into the forests. The light dimmed considerably as the canopy thickened.

"I've not been to this part before, or I don't think I have."

Parts of the more forested areas did look the same. Anna didn't care. She ambled about until she found a track and then followed it.

"It's one of several little-used tracks in the common. Most of the visitors stay on the larger tracks

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or the roads. I like the isolation."

He craned his neck upwards. "I can see why Catherine brings new lovers here. It's quite private."

She looked around. It *was* relatively quiet here.

His grin reflected hers. "Do you want to?"

Before she could answer, he steered her off the track and pinned her up against a tree. His finger trailed down her cheek, sending a series of sparks down her spine. If it were nighttime, she imagined they would have lit up her body.

His lips glided over her neck, and a hint of lavender filled her nostrils.

Gripping his wonderful muscled back, she freed his shirt from his pants. Energy arced over her fingers as she caressed bare skin.

A shiver raced across Hugh's back.

His tongue licked the lobe of her ear, sending another jolt over her over-sensitive body. The trunk of the large elm felt reassuringly hard against her back. In between one heartbeat and the next, Hugh's mouth descended on hers. With lingering caresses of tongues, they moved in sync of her rapidly increasing heartbeat.

Her hands explored places she'd been unable to before. Hugh's breath quickened as she teased his nipple. She gasped when he cupped her breast through the fabric of her sports bra. Cool air touched her skin as he removed the fabric from her breast. Breathing in the musk of his scent intermingled with forest earth, she rested her head against the trunk, savoring the feel of his mouth as he suckled and

teased her hardened nipple.

She ran her fingers through his silky dark hair, moaning softly with each flick of his tongue.

The skirt she wore was no barrier to his hand, which prized the fabric up to her waist. Cupping her thong, his thumb moved over her mound while fingers teased the fabric from her curls. She widened her legs and gasped as he thrust a finger deep inside her.

A gentle vibration of energy trickled from where his tongue rested on her breast to where his finger probed. It was so subtle, Anna wasn't sure if she'd imagined it.

Was he giving back to her, or was it the energy from the gem 'reviving' her?

Another trickle began at her nipple and ended in her passage. The red stone warmed against her throat.

Suddenly he drew back. "What am I doing?"

Initially flattered that she'd driven him to give, it fell away as awareness of any chance with him may have been hopelessly dashed.

He hastily tucked in his shirt. "We should go."

"What happened?"

She gazed into eyes of smoldering desire and detected another emotion; fear.

"I've never lost control before."

"It felt wonderful."

"Of course it does," he snapped. "That's why it so damn hard not to be lulled into giving."

She could not leave him like this. He seemed torn, desperately so.

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Looking around, Hugh ran his hand through his hair. "Anyone could come through here. Get dressed."

Reluctantly she readjusted the sports bra over her breasts. Her nipples ached to be suckled, not imprisoned. "Why are you afraid?"

The moment the words were out, she knew she'd made a mistake.

"We should go."

Beyond the trees, Anna heard a scream.

Shoving her T-shirt down, she followed Hugh's receding back as he ran towards the source.

The light from the riding trail was bright compared to the forest. It made it easier to see the struggling woman. The man looked up, his eyes full of anger. He shoved the woman from him and ran.

A half dozen strides later, Anna reached the woman who looked up in wild terror. Red seeped from her abdomen. She'd been stabbed.

* * * *

Hugh could smell the man's fear and frustration at being caught. A man who killed was the worst kind of creature.

Coward, he spat.

Had Anna not been with him, he may have apprehended him, or done worse. It didn't matter; the scent of *that* kind was easy to track.

Hugh. I sensed your distress.

I've just witnessed a stabbing, and gave Catherine a

visual representation of the attacker.

Look after her, I'll deal with him.

It would not be the last of this conversation. Catherine knew exactly what had happened between him and Anna.

As for the wounded woman, he hesitated on what to do. She would die unless he healed her. The old woman in the gallery had little strength to be a danger to him. A young woman on the edge of death was far more dangerous.

"Help her."

He'd not dared since Karla died, except those he considered safe, and even then it was easier to not be become involved. *"It's risky."*

"How so?"

There was no time to explain. He'd have to risk it or leave her to die.

Anna placed her hands over the wound. The woman passed out at her touch.

"You fool. She could have killed you."

Her hard gaze made him wince. *"Is your existence so important that you would rather continue to live like this?"*

Hugh couldn't believe what she'd said. This existence was not one he despised.

"If I had known of this sooner, I'd have been able to end this miserable existence long ago. Now show me."

He shook his head. No way was he going to get involved. *"We should go."*

"Like hell we are." A crackle of energy flowed

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between her hands. Anna was incredibly strong, too strong. The gem glowed red around her neck. The energy was coming from there, energy he had fed into her.

Anna's face went rigid.

He cursed as he placed his hands over Anna's, tempering the channeling. Visualizing the puncture in the woman's abdomen, he began to heal the cut.

Anna's gaze remained unwavering as she focused on the wound. She must be seeing it, too. A pity he couldn't read her mind and find out for sure.

In the distance, he heard horses. It would most likely be the police.

He didn't want to stay and find out. It was far too difficult to explain to the police or anyone else what they were doing. Stealing more of Anna's energy, the last of the cut disappeared.

Grabbing Anna, he hoisted her up. "We have to go."

Anna looked at her bloodied hands as if they weren't her own. She looked up at Hugh, concern on her face.

"Wipe it on your T-shirt."

Anna wrinkled her nose as she did so.

"Let's go."

"We can't leave her here."

"Hear that?"

She inclined her head. "Oh."

"You want to explain what you did?"

Anna ran. Thank goodness she showed sense, and quickly.

They barely made it back into the forest when the shouts came.

"Call the ambulance," someone yelled.

Getting back to his house would be tricky, particularly with the blood on Anna's T-shirt.

"Take it off."

She removed her T-shirt quickly, as if relieved to be rid of it. Hugh wiped his hands on it. Satisfied they would be clean enough, he stripped off his shirt and gave it to Anna. "Wear this."

Her eyes widened in admiration as her gaze fell onto his chest. As much as he wanted her hands to run over his torso, they had to get out of here as quickly as possible. "I'm going to have to walk back like this, so let's make it quick."

Anna handed the shirt back to him. "This sports bra won't look out of place. Women tend to walk about half naked in the summer."

She was right there. Except seeing *her* half naked was setting his groin on fire.

After slipping back on the shirt, he folded the T-shirt to hide the blood. "Take the most private way back to the lake."

Anna moved with determination, her breasts bobbing up and down as she walked. Tearing his gaze from her, he concentrated on the narrow track. He had no idea where they were, but Anna appeared to know.

She reached a larger track. Ahead, he saw the lake. Taking her hand, he walked as quickly as possible towards his house.

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A group jogged past. One of the men gave Anna more than an appreciative glance. A sudden wave of jealousy overtook him. It took him by surprise.

Only after he bolted the door to his house did he dare to relax. It was then he spotted a dark stain on her skirt. "Give me all your clothes. I'll go and wash them."

Anna smiled as if she hadn't heard him. "I healed her." Shaking her head, she gave a disapproving gaze. "How could you refuse to save the life of another?"

He'd deal with the long-term dangers of that idea later. Right now he wanted to get rid of the evidence. "Your clothes."

Piece by piece, Anna handed them to him, her thong last.

His trousers strained under her presence. Frustrated he needed her so desperately, he walked from the room.

"Where's the bathroom?"

Where was his mind? He returned to her side, very aware of her nakedness. "The en-suite in my bedroom has a spa. I'll show you."

After they entered the bedroom, she gasped at the size of the bed. "You could sleep three in there. Have you?"

"I never bring anyone to this room. I use another for such a purpose." He didn't need lingering memories of every sexual encounter. It was far easier to keep sleep and sex separate.

He turned on the tap over the spa. "When it's half full, turn the tap off and get in. I'm going to wash

these clothes.”

He heard a clatter and looked back. She had removed the crystal and placed it on the marble dresser.

Watching her climb into the bath sent his cock painfully hard. Hugh left the bathroom before he was tempted to take her then and there.

In the laundry, he removed his trousers. Having no restriction at all sent a sigh of relief through him. As he shoved the clothes in the machine, he contemplated what to do. Showing her the healing in some ways had been a mistake. He had done it to show her there were alternatives. He knew that to be a lie. He’d shown her the healing so he’d feel less guilty in finding an out.

The throbbing in his cock began to ease; not so, the ache in his heart. Catherine was conspiring to bring him and Anna together, and a tiny part of him wanted that more than anything. The remainder felt as if fate were closing all avenues of escape. The danger, however, was all too real. He could kill Anna, as he had killed Karla.

CHAPTER NINE

Anna widened her arms, barely reaching the edges of the spa. The jets of water felt wonderful over her body. A pity her heart wasn't so at ease.

Hugh appeared torn with what to do. First he'd showed her the healing, then as quickly wanted her never to try it again. Yet how could she forget it?

Leaning against the end of the spa, she raised her hands. The incredible thrill of healing the woman returned. Why hadn't her mother shared the knowledge with her?

She closed her eyes. Whatever the reason, it didn't matter now. She now knew how to aid another, and would do so again if the need eventuated.

Hearing footsteps, Anna re-opened her eyes.

Hugh stood beside the bath wearing only boxer shorts. He removed them quickly, but not so fast the Anna could miss his erection. He slipped into the bath as if he weren't suffering from desire at all. He touched her knee with his ankle before abruptly removing it again.

He took in a deep breath, sending a ripple over the water. "It's very easy to be ensnared into thinking

you can cure the ills of all those you meet. It can become like a drug, one you cannot become free of."

She couldn't see how. "Surely you felt a sense of achievement when you saved another."

"The gem you possessed stored extra energy. Imagine when it's gone and you're on your own. You can end up fighting for your life."

"She was nearly dead," she retorted, annoyed by his callousness.

"The need to live is strongest when one is on the verge of death. Imagine a person drowning and you're trying to save them. What do they do when you are close to them?"

Many years ago she had rescued a young boy from the surging waves on a nearby beach. In his panic he'd climbed over her, forcing her underwater. Being continuously kicked by the boy's legs prevented her from being able to resurface. In a bid to be free of him she'd tried to sink deeper, but he'd grabbed her hair, preventing her from doing so. With strength Anna didn't know she possessed, she curled her body into a ball and kicked the boy away.

Free of him, she resurfaced. Light returned to her closed eyelids, as did fresh air on her face. She spat out the water, and breath by heaving breath, dragged the life giving air back into her lungs.

Only then did she think of the boy's life, and cared even less if he lived or died.

Better one to die than both of us.

At the time she had been ashamed at thinking such words. Fortunately a man arrived on a surfboard and

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grabbed the boy, still coughing and sputtering, from the water.

Hugh gave a knowing smile. "I see you have. Did you feel the need to live obscure everything else?"

It had, much to her shame. She told him what happened.

"You were right to save yourself first. We aren't meant to be martyrs."

"I was confident I could save that woman in the park and not be in any danger."

"That's what makes you vulnerable to others. Trust me. You don't want to make it a habit."

"Why bother to show me at all?"

He seemed to go silent for some time. She waited.

Eventually he began. "I've tried that way too, believe me. Initially you do it to give others a second chance. After a while it goes to your head. Then you become overconfident, and think you can play God. You then believe this gift is there for a reason and try to justify your action that way. Over time you will become overconfident, until one day you'll find someone who is too strong for you."

Like the person who steals once too often, they are eventually caught. It appeared the healing was not going to provide an easy out for her.

What an irony, she thought, smiling.

"What's so amusing?"

"It's a curse, isn't it?"

His lips drew into a smile, making his face come alive. A tug deep inside her heart made her swallow. This was another side of him, a side she would

imagine existing in abundance if he were mortal. That was another thing, one her mother had been unable to answer, and she suspected Hugh wouldn't know either.

"Will I be long-lived like you?"

He stared at her, baffled. "I truly don't know. I simply turned and have remained this age ever since."

People had told her that she looked young for her age. Was it possible the aging process was slowing down, or—

A gentle caress over her ankle made her start. "There's one more thing I have to tell you..."

He went quite still.

Anna waited, hoping the words weren't *before I leave you*.

"I must tell you about Karla."

She masked her inner turmoil with a veneer of calm. This moment she had waited for since they met.

* * * *

Aside from Catherine, he'd not confided to another about Karla. There hadn't been a reason to before. He removed his foot from her ankle. Even that level of contact was beginning to affect him in ways that disturbed and thrilled him.

He could not afford to lose Anna in a hasty decision motivated by fear. He had to break all the barriers between them and to do that, the wounds regarding Karla had to be re-opened.

REDEMPTION

The memory returned.

* * * *

It was nearing sunset. Snow has fallen during the day, turning the land around his estate that overlooked the Cornwall coast, into a white carpet. The full moon, had there been a clear sky, would have begun its ascent.

He had servants, as any aristocrat did, but on the night of the full moon he'd sent them away. Such activities were best conducted in their absence.

The parties had been simple affairs. Food and wine was left by the servants, and the rooms prepared for private trysts. A fire was usually the only source of light in mid-winter casting a hue over the faces of his guests, hiding all the imperfections that daylight refused to.

It was in such shadows that he met Karla.

When she entered the room with Catherine, he could not take his eyes from her. Catherine had tried to match him before, to no avail, but this woman nearly took his breath away. Her blond curls cascaded past her shoulders. Her face was so perfect in form, so delicate in this light. A fragile vase he wanted to hold and protect.

According to Catherine, she was a widower with no children. *She's different to your usual fare, Hugh. At least taste her first before deciding.*

The crackling of the fire and the scent of *her* completely addled his senses. His groin burned with

a need that shocked him.

Karla raised her hand to be kissed. Her eyelashes fluttered as his lips brushed her skin. A gasp escaped her lips and her eyes went dreamy.

He should have known then what was amiss. A man caught in the throes of a new love does not think clearly at all. Hugh opened his eyes, and the image faded.

* * * *

Anna watched him intently. "Were you reminiscing about Karla?"

Why hadn't I seen the danger I posed to her sooner?
"Yes."

She took in a deep breath, causing the water to ripple. "The expression on your face changed just before you opened your eyes. You loved her the moment you met her."

How could she possibly know? "Are you sure you can't read my mind?"

"Not at all. Whatever is in your mind is quite safe from me." She smiled wryly. "It's the one thing that worried my mother so long. *Lamia* can read the minds of each other, and you can read the mind of a human. I should be able to open or close my mind at will, but it's closed."

What a relief she couldn't read the turmoil in his mind. "I'm glad you can't."

Her faint smile held a touch of sadness. "I'd like to be able to share what you're remembering."

REDEMPTION

"Being unable to read your mind is not a bad thing."

"I've not hidden from you how I feel."

She was reaching too close to a place he didn't want to venture into.

"Could you read Karla's mind?"

In hindsight, it had been the gravest mistake of all. "I didn't want to steal how she felt about me. It was stupid, I know. I blinded myself into believing her love for me was as strong as mine was for her."

The water sloshed as Anna moved towards him. He moved to one side, allowing her to fill the space beside him. She leaned against him, her breast touching his shoulder, sending a jolt of energy right to his groin.

She slid one arm around his waist and leaned against his shoulder. Her breath sent shivers over his neck. Her chin nuzzled his shoulder.

Was she comforting him? He tried to control his growing arousal.

"Don't fight it," Anna murmured.

That was easier said than done.

She trailed a finger over his torso, pausing at the base of his shaft. He was about to move her hand away when she raised it slightly. "Tell me how she died."

He didn't want to, but if there was going to any future between them, she had to know it all. He closed his eyes trying to will the image back, fearing what he would see.

* * * *

Karla had been the hesitant one when it came to Hugh wanting to lose his immortality. She savored the intense sexual experiences he gave her, and was reluctant to give that up. Hugh suffered under the totally alien experience of impatience.

One night, he gave her an ultimatum.

Reluctance had filled her eyes as Karla had laid for him, her body ready but her heart torn. He groaned as he recalled the intense feelings as he entered her. Her whimpers of delight soon changed into a low moan, but she wouldn't give her all to him.

* * * *

"I should have backed away, but I was so close to having what I desired, I couldn't. In desperation, I took and took from her, killing her."

Hugh thrust the image from his mind, unable to bear it. "I'd rather exist like this than risk killing you."

Anna stroked his chest, calming his rapid breathing. "You won't consider me, just as you refused to consider her."

He tried to comprehend what she was saying. "I don't understand."

"You project what you want onto us. In Karla's case, you wanted her to make you mortal and you killed her in a desperate bid to achieve it. In mine, you want to deny yourself a second chance to redeem yourself."

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The words cut at him more deeply than stabbing his heart with a knife. Was she right? Did he want to avoid a chance at redemption?

Unable to speak the truth, he gently eased her away. "I need to be away from you for a little while."

"Until the full moon," she quickly added.

He lowered his gaze to avoid hers. "Yes."

Anna rose to her knees, and began to climb over him. With one knee on either side of his thighs, she paused, sending a wave of panic through him. He was acutely aware of where she had positioned herself. The tip of his cock was a hair's breadth from what could be oblivion for both of them.

Forced to look at her face he winced. She was not going to give up on him just yet.

Anna nudged the tip of his cock with her clit. "I don't plan to do anything foolish. I want you to remember how close we've become, and with a tiny bit of effort, could end this if you would only let me into your heart."

The need became unbearable. He wanted to grip her hips, press her down and plunge himself into her. "Please. Get off."

In desperation, he cupped her buttocks in a bid to get her off him. He heard a thud as her knee gave way instead. Her lips parted as she cried out.

For a brief instant he worried he'd hurt her. On the next breath he nearly fainted with the sensations of his cock partway inside her vagina. A sense of total completion filled his soul. She could free him.

This can't happen.

With all his will, he lifted her off. The separation almost tore his heart in two. He leaned against the end of the bath. An unbearable void threatened to drown him.

Shaking, Anna looked at him with genuine fear in her eyes. "I had no idea."

"Please. Leave me."

He heard her leave the bathroom, and possibly his life.

CHAPTER TEN

Standing beside the dryer in his laundry, Anna waited for the cycle to complete. The slip in the bath had been a genuine accident, although she doubted he'd see it like that. She could save him and herself if he dared to risk it. The only problem was to convince that ending this existence was worth dying for.

The noise of the dryer abated. Opening the door she pulled out her clothes. Still slightly damp, she put them on anyway.

She touched her neck. *Damn*. The crystal was still in the bathroom.

If Hugh wanted to see her again, he'd bring it with him. He knew where she lived. That is, if he did bother to see her again before the full moon.

Did she want to see him again?

More than anything, but it would only lead to more pain. He was not going to change his mind and give to her.

Outside his house, the darkness closed over her like a vise. She gave his bedroom window one last look, then she left.

A few streets later, she reached the door of her flat. Back inside the quiet attic, she looked out to the dimly lit street below. No way could she sleep after touching him so intimately and capturing what could be.

She recalled Hugh's wistful expression when he remembered Karla the first time they'd met, followed by the anguish in his eyes when she'd died. That had paled in comparison to the terror in his eyes when he lifted her off his body.

All those conflicting emotions needed to end up on the canvas.

The brush moved over the canvas as if controlled by another. Sweat formed over her brow, forcing her to wipe her forehead with the back of her hand. Her vision blurred as the night wore on. When she nearly stumbled into the painting, she stopped. No way could she damage this work.

Exhausted, she placed the brushes in the jar of turpentine, stood back and looked.

The canvas appeared to be submerged in water so dark that it was impossible to see anything beneath. Was that how she saw Hugh? Was he submerged so deeply in the darkness there was no way she could ever free him?

She turned towards the window. Outside, the dawn of a new day approached. Yawning, she returned to her room, removed her clothes, drew the sheet over her body and let exhaustion take her into oblivion.

A buzz rang in her head. She ignored it and

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turned over. The buzz grew louder, until the sound of ringing invaded her senses. Clawing her hand along the table beside the bed, she found the edge of the phone. Gripping it, she lifted the handset to her ear.

"Hello," she croaked.

"Anna. It's Mum."

She glanced at the clock. It was nearly midday.

"This is urgent."

The last remnants of sleep left her. "What is it?"

"A lovely lady called Catherine rang me a couple of days ago. It seems you've found a man who could end all your problems."

What a gall to contact her mother like that. As to solving her problems, her mother had no idea. "Not in the way I want."

"Catherine said you might be angry. Don't. She cares about Hugh deeply, or she'd never have contacted me."

Anna squeezed her eyes shut. The image of Hugh's stricken face as she climbed out of the bath continued to haunt her.

"Anna?"

"I'm here."

"She told me about the woman you and Hugh healed in the common."

Lecture time. She could tell by the tone in her mother's voice. "I know, and it's a bad way to exist. Why didn't you warn me?"

The sound on the phone appeared to go dead. She knew it hadn't.

"You never showed any signs of the ability to heal.

I arranged several accidents. The latest was when I cut my arm on the day you turned eighteen. You touched the cut and nothing happened."

Anna remembered many of the accidents. "You did it on purpose?"

"Of course I did. I wanted to see if you were, well, normal or not. Since I had no other to compare you to I had no idea if you would develop the ability or not. Obviously I was premature."

"I'd rather you'd warned me about the healing."

"It can be like a drug. It can kill you if you —"

"Yeah. Hugh told me."

"He's no fool. Listen to me. Your best chance is to stay with him. Even if it takes a year for him to come around, give him that. Believe me, a year is nothing compared to what could be."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Catherine told me she has never encountered anyone who has a similar history to you."

"I'm unique, so what?"

"Anna. You have no idea how unique. You were conceived the night I became mortal. I had no idea that you would develop part *lamia* and part human traits. It's only when the dreams started that I feared the worst."

Has she heard her right? "You *knew* there was a risk this could happen?"

"Yes, but I took it anyway."

She held the phone gingerly in her hands. "Hugh lacks the will."

"Your father waited five years for me. You must be

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prepared to do the same with Hugh."

"I don't know if I could stand waiting that long," Anna whispered.

"You don't have any real alternative."

There were many choices, some more dangerous than others.

"I'll think about it. Goodbye, Mother," and hung up.

What *would* she do if Hugh lacked the courage to try?

No answers came to her. Only one thing aided her in times like this; her work.

Anna returned to the attic. Picking up a brush, she thought about calling Catherine. What would be the use in doing that? Catherine had done so much as it was.

It was up to her. How, was the problem?

Anna's mind felt like it was caught in a sea of fog. She let the feeling take hold. Dipping her brush into Prussian-blue paint, she knew what to add next. Layer by layer, she would be able to create Hugh's future.

It would take some time to do.

The sun rose, then sank again. Between sleeping and waiting for the paint to dry a little, the days became a blur. Occasionally she wandered out to eat, and then ended up in the common, walking about for what felt like hours.

One day, the sun rose and Anna knew she was done. Lowering the brush, she stepped back. *What have I created?*

Mixed hues of blue and indigo flowed together to produce an effect similar to a raging river. How she invoked that effect, she had no idea. Like all her work, it just happened.

Deep inside the current of water she saw Hugh, not as a man but as shadows within shadows. In the centre of his outline was a spark of gold, so tiny she thought it initially to be a piece of lint.

If that wasn't confusing enough, the other image—bright oranges and greens.

The message was obvious. Save Hugh before he drowns in his own darkness.

Great, but he had to want to.

Her agent, Miranda, had been pestering her for weeks regarding her latest work. With a week to go until the full moon, Anna hoped that Miranda would help her with the next step.

* * * *

Hugh heard the knock at the door. Each time he hoped it was Anna, only to be disappointed. He should go and see her but each time he reached the street she lived in, he turned back.

Footsteps from the steps behind made him turn around.

"You sent her away," Catherine reminded him.

Anna had walked out on him, but he'd not enlightened Catherine of that fact.

Looking through the eyepiece, his heart sank. He opened the door.

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The woman looked vaguely familiar. Her painted red nails reminded him of where they'd met last, in the gallery. Miranda was her name. A man beside her held a large canvas that covered most of his body.

Miranda looked around. "It's almost dry, so it's best to hang it straight away. Do you have a place to put it?"

He had mentioned to Anna about producing a painting, then had forgotten all about it. Was this it? Since it hadn't completely dried, it seemed odd to deliver it now.

Unless it was a warning.

Wild thoughts of Anna reneging on meeting him on the full moon crossed his mind. Her needs would be as bad as his own were. Surely she'd not settle for another.

Catherine motioned them inside. "I have the perfect place for it. Come this way."

The man carrying the work followed Catherine into a sunroom, a place Hugh usually sat and read.

Catherine pointed to a section of pale cream wallpaper. "Here. We'll hang it later."

When the young man positioned the canvas, Hugh stood back.

Catherine stood beside him. "I say. That's... different."

A vice-like grip caught and twisted Hugh's heart. He could have wept at what he saw. He was drowning and nobody could save him.

Nobody except Anna.

Miranda studied it. "This is her most extreme

work. It cuts into her very soul. I can almost imagine her trying to save another who is already lost."

Exactly how he perceived it. Anna was hovering above the water, unable to reach him.

The soft touch of Catherine's hand stilled his trembling one.

Miranda looked worried. "Anna looked shattered when I collected this from her. I've never seen her so messed up after completing a piece of work before."

No wonder Anna didn't want to see him, if what he saw in the canvas was how she perceived him. "Tell her, thank you."

Miranda inclined her head. "By the way, this will be her last exhibition for a while."

Hugh and Catherine exchanged worried glances.

Miranda didn't appear to notice.

At the door, she handed a card to Hugh. "If you ever think of selling it, contact me."

Hugh and Catherine returned to the painting.

Catherine gave him a stern gaze. "The threat is not hard to miss. She will not have you again unless you allow her into your heart."

He didn't want her to resort to healing, but it seemed that was what she was planning to do. As for the work she created, a tiny spark of hope was all that remained within his soul. The layers of darkness related to his fear, and of them there were many.

Then he saw it. "Oh."

Catherine squeezed his shoulder. "I say. She hasn't missed a thing."

Hugh peered closer. Faint lines appeared between

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his groin and Anna's, flowing into her womb and back.

Catherine released him. "Giving and taking. She's made it clear what she wants."

His heart burst. "I can't risk it."

"Go to her, and let your heart decide."

"It already has, but I still can't."

"Then you're a fool."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As dusk approached, the need to get outside and find someone to fuck began to grow. Anna glanced out of her window. No way could she go back to what she'd done before. Each man she fucked would always be compared to Hugh.

It seemed that might be her only option, an anonymous fuck for the night. Perhaps even two men might help dissipate the need faster so she could be freed of the need for another month.

He promised to see you on the full moon.

Prior to delivering the painting, that may have been so. Now days had passed, and still no word. Had she ruined her chance by sending it to him? As daylight waned, she began to fear just that.

A tiny part had clung to the hope that he still might turn up. She glanced at her watch: ten-thirty. With an hour and a half to go till midnight, doubt began to creep in.

Returning to her wardrobe she considered her options. Don a skimpy skirt and top and hit a nightclub as she always did, or find someone who was ill. The latter had crossed her mind again and

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again, as did the warnings by her mother and Hugh.

Slamming the cupboard door shut, she sat on the bed. No way was she going to go back to men again. Hugh may be lost to her, but that didn't mean she had to go out there and act like a walking fucking machine.

You could always go to Hugh's place.

How many times had she tried to do just that? She had walked to the street where his house was and then bolted.

Once, she had seen Catherine leaving. She had briefly shaken her head before walking in the opposite direction, making it clear she could do no more.

Anna didn't bother returning after that. What was the point? He'd come to her if he needed her badly enough.

It seemed with each second that passed, that he didn't.

What would she do? What if she went out tonight and found a person who needed her aid? At least she could do something useful with the healing gift she possessed. Except tonight didn't seem like a good time to start. Her emotions weren't being orderly at all. With a libido that began to ignite out of control, she was more likely to kill someone than heal.

Nope. Better to get fucked senseless and think about the healing some other time.

The clock beeped, making her jump. Eleven p.m.

Hell, what was she going to do? Was it worth trying one last time with Hugh?

Before she could change her mind she pulled on a silver sequined top. Grabbing black satin pants, she slipped them on.

After finding a pair of shoes and her handbag she decided to go to the nightclub. If Hugh was going to be anywhere, he'd be there.

Closing the door behind her she took in a deep breath. Her heart began to beat faster, the cause not entirely due to Hugh. Anticipation filled her. Moisture flowed between her legs as it always did before she went on the prowl. Her determination not to have a man for the night weakened.

Before the more rational part of her mind took over with thoughts such as locking herself in for the night, Anna closed the door behind her.

Movement caught her eye. Someone was waiting in the street. "Hello?"

The figure moved into the street light.

What was she doing here? "Catherine?"

She appeared, wearing a tight, sleeveless black dress that fell to her knees. "He's at the nightclub."

Every fiber within Anna's body felt as if it was going to snap. He had gone after all.

Catherine's cheeks seemed to be wet from tears. "He was shocked by your work, and his torment has been painful to watch ever since."

As had been her intention, but it appeared she'd made a mistake. "It's the truth, but it seems he wasn't ready to face it."

Catherine took a step backwards. "He is, Anna, but part of him won't take that final leap. He's so

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desperately afraid to hurt you that he would rather suffer than do so."

"If it's so hopeless, why are you here?"

Catherine extended her hand. "I can't give up and I know, neither can you. Come on. We don't have much time."

The night was particularly steamy and the streets were full of people. Anna wished she had worn her skirt, but it reminded her too much of first meeting with Hugh.

"Hey, love."

As if being shaken from a dream, Anna turned around. A dark sedan had pulled up beside them.

A young man leant out of the passenger window. "Want a lift?"

He had such beautiful dark eyes. His lips parted as if anticipating her acceptance. Another stirred in the car. The passenger leaned back so she could get a get a better look at the driver.

Tousled blond hair partly covered his handsome face.

"Don't," Catherine warned.

Anna was so tempted that it took her effort to heed her friend's warning.

Catherine whispered in her ear. "Wait until you have seen Hugh. If he refuses, then..."

An idea occurred to her. *Why not have a backup plan?* "Where are you going?"

"The bar up the corner, you know the one."

He nodded eagerly.

"If I'm there at midnight, I'll come with both of

you."

He glanced at her. "And your friend? Will she come too?"

Catherine leaned forward. The driver's gaze went from her breasts to her face. "Midnight, as she said. We don't need a lift now."

The man blinked, then seemed to look oddly at Catherine before he sank back into the car. His companion nodded. "We'll see you then, perhaps."

A squeal of tires and the sedan sped away.

Catherine chuckled. "At times the ability to influence a mind is a very useful skill to have."

So that was what she had been doing.

"You wanted to jump in, so I decided to stave temptation away from you."

"You didn't seem to hesitate in suggesting an alternative, should —"

"Should you fail? I'll not be too eager to return to them," Catherine warned. "Which is why I am accompanying you tonight. You need to remain focused."

Her cunt was beginning to pulse with unrequited lust. "I'm getting in quite a bad way." That was an understatement. The pants she wore felt damp between her legs. She was dripping with desire. Holding back was soon not going to be an option, and soon, not even Catherine would be able to stop her.

The thump thump of the music from the nightclub reached them. The building was impossible to miss amongst the many restaurants.

Inside, it was full as usual. Many of the revelers

gyrated to the incessant beat. The scent of desire filled her nostrils, enhancing her arousal to breaking point.

Where was Hugh amongst all these people?

Catherine shouted above the music. "Over there."

After weaving through the crowd, Anna got her first good look at him since three weeks ago. He leaned against the bar with a drink in hand. His face was set in grin determination but she sensed his tension as conflicting emotions raged within.

Was there was still a chance to put this right?

Now that she was here, she hesitated. To turn away would be a mistake. Anna had to give him a chance, even if it was on his terms. If the spark in the picture she gave him faded and died, she would only have herself to blame.

A woman approached Hugh, forcing a constriction in Anna's throat. As difficult as it was to watch Hugh about to taste another woman, she forced herself to do so.

Hugh cupped the woman's glossy hair and drew her lips to his.

"He'll not take her," Catherine assured her.

"How do you know that?"

"I sense such things. Now, come on. When he is done you must speak to him, agree to a compromise if you must."

Slowly an undercurrent of energy tingled over her body. Hugh may have shut her out of his life, but not so the connection he'd made with her at the gallery.

Holding the woman, Hugh looked up. He smiled briefly at Anna, but didn't appear to be too enthused

by her appearance.

The woman began to kiss him, and he wasn't resisting at all.

Was he doing it on purpose?

As far as Anna was concerned, he may as well have struck her instead. He seemed determined to find another for the night.

What a fool she was to have even bothered to try. "I'm leaving."

Catherine gripped her arm. "You can't just give up."

He was kissing the woman with a passion that sent her into a fit of jealousy. "What else is there? I either find a man who will fuck me senseless, or I'll go and try to find someone to heal. I'll not stay here and be humiliated like this."

Then she had it, a way to get his attention. She would do to him what he was doing to her, except it would be a healing, not sex.

"Catherine. Tell him that I plan to heal someone."

Her eyes widened in concern. "Are you sure you want to take such a risk? It could be seen as desperation."

To her it *was* desperation. Maybe if she ended up at risk trying to heal another, he'd come to her aid. He looked pretty satisfied as it was with the woman he was kissing, regardless of Catherine's assurance that he would not take her.

"It's a stupid idea, Anna."

It was, now reason had a chance to return. It would be such a childish act to force onto on a man who was

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clearly not interested in having her back.

"Why not talk to him?" Catherine suggested.

Anna forced down the bile in her throat as the woman began to sag in his arms. He would have touched her cunt, savoring her essences while Anna screamed inside with unrequited desire.

The tingling sensation began to weaken. Hugh had finished tasting her. The woman stumbled backward into the arms of another man.

She'd talk to him all right. Talk to him and tell him what she planned to do.

Shoving her way through the crowd, Anna reached Hugh's side. She tugged his shirt. He glanced at her, not quite believing she would dare to invade his space.

He mouthed the word. *Anna?*

"I could love you, you idiot, if you let me," she shouted.

Why had she just said that?

The whole of his body stiffened, then relaxed. He shook his head. "Go away. I don't need you."

She gripped his shirt harder. "Liar."

He looked at Catherine, furious.

She shrugged.

Leaning over to Anna, he said loudly, "The darkness can't get any worse, can it? So let me live in it."

Even Anna could tell he was very drunk, and wallowing in self-pity.

Releasing her grip, Anna shoved him away. Was this a man she'd professed to possibly loving?

"Watch this," she yelled, not caring if he heard her or not.

Anna searched for the tallest hunk in the nightclub. He was blond, muscular and oozed sex. He was out for a good time. The woman he held in his embrace was writhing against him. With each step Anna took towards them she hoped Hugh would intervene, and wept inside when he didn't.

She could smell the sweat on the blond man's body. His hand moved up and down in rapid movements between the woman's legs. Even though Anna couldn't hear her, the woman was in the throes of an orgasm.

Her cunt was throbbing, and if he were willing, she'd get a quick release here before she left his life for good.

The woman sagged into his arms. He leaned down to her, and from the woman's reaction, he was asking to be serviced.

The hunk steered her towards a darkened area. He leaned against the wall, shielding her. It was obvious what she was going to do to him. Should she find someone else? The thought, now she had time to think about it, made her feel ill. She didn't need to do this anymore.

She was here to spite Hugh and it was wrong, all wrong. What right did she have to make an ultimatum? Perhaps if she gave him time, as her mother suggested, he may come around.

Catherine inclined her head towards the exit. Hugh's back was to her. She really had messed things

up.

Anna drew in the outside air, feeling a sense of freedom from the suffocating atmosphere inside.

Catherine gave a wan smile. "He's torn, Anna. I'd tread very carefully. Right now, I'd suggest you don't go back in, or carry out your threat to heal another to bring him running. Wait for him."

Jealousy threatened to overtake her. "Even if he takes another woman for the night?"

"Even then. Find another man and get your release. Don't appear weak to him. Show him what you are prepared to go through."

She tried to suppress the feeling of overwhelming panic at never seeing him again.

Catherine's eyes were full of compassion. "Hugh has lived for a long time, and to him this does not have the same edge of desperation it holds for you. Find a man and go home with him. There is nothing else you can do."

Anna checked her watch. Ten minutes to midnight. No way was she going back into that nightclub.

The walk back felt impossibly long and lonely. As she neared the pub on the corner, she spotted the man she'd planned to meet at midnight.

She gritted her teeth as the need to fuck him senseless threatened to overwhelm her.

He approached, grinning. "Hi, there."

She grabbed his sleeve. "Where's your friend?"

He smelt of beer. "He's coming. If you want to wait with me, we can give you a lift."

"Is that all you want?"

"You're offering more?"

"Both of you, if you want."

He grinned. "I like the sound of that. Where's your friend?"

"She's gone with someone else."

"That's a pity. I quite fancied her."

She cupped his semi-aroused cock. "You want a quick fuck or not?"

Startled, he looked to where her hand was. "You aren't planning to do it here?"

Releasing his cock, she inclined her head. "What about around the corner?"

Shuffling backwards, he increased the gap between them. "We'll wait for my friend first."

Anna closed the gap again. "I need a quick fuck. Now."

He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Sorry, but I don't think so. You're a bit too aggressive for my liking."

"Fine," she muttered and shoved past him.

She heard the screech of a car behind her, followed by a thud. The young man who'd rejected her was lying face up near the side of the road.

A door slammed and his friend ran towards him. A couple of people opened the door of a nearby house, looking out.

"Call an ambulance," a woman said. Her companion ran back inside.

Barely a silhouette in this semi-gloom, she caught the young man's face. He appeared so very pale. She took a step forward, heeding Hugh's warning.

REDEMPTION

If he's dead, it won't matter, will it?

What if she did take that leap? What would it mean to her and Hugh? A line would be crossed, one that could jeopardize any future plan with Hugh.

What future plans? Hugh had rejected her, and it was up to her to decide her future.

She was about to take another step when a hand on her shoulder made her jump. "Don't do it."

Hugh.

The tenderness on his face took her breath away. A moment later it was gone. The hard eyes returned. "Stay here. I mean it."

"Why? You don't—"

His mouth descended on hers. Fire mixed with liquid heat tore throughout her. She leaned into his body, feeling his erection against her.

Abruptly he released her, his breath rapid. "I made a mistake leaving you."

Her stomach flipped. Controlling her racing heart, she began to comprehend what his words meant.

"Would you have tried to heal the young man had I not returned?"

Words refused to reach her lips. She truly didn't know.

He lifted his hand. "It doesn't matter now. Nothing does. Now stay here."

Hugh wandered over to where the man lay. Kneeling, he placed his hand on the young man's forehead. Anna felt a subtle undercurrent of energy flow between Hugh and the youth, but nothing returned.

He was dead.

Shaking his head, Hugh rose. The driver of the car leaned against the bonnet, blank faced and very shaken. Hugh approached the driver who looked up at him in surprise. A growing crowd murmured amongst themselves.

The word *doctor* reached her ears.

A brief burst of energy rippled over her body, causing her nipples to peak. She pressed her legs together.

What was Hugh doing to the poor man?

The driver's expression slowly became serene. As suddenly as it came, the energy disappeared.

The driver leaned against the bonnet of his car.

Hugh returned to her side. "The young man died instantly. You would have been able to do nothing for him."

Trembling, she crossed her arms to steady herself. "I'm not sure what I was, or wasn't going to do."

"I know that, my sweet," came a soft, feminine husky voice from behind her. Catherine gave a wry smile. "I suggest we leave. You are attracting far too much attention, Hugh."

An older woman tugged at Hugh's arm. "Are you a doctor?"

He caressed her cheek. "No. I suggest you go home."

The woman's face went momentarily blank.

Hugh gripped Anna's wrist, leading her away from the scene.

"I'll stay," Catherine said.

REDEMPTION

"What about your...needs?"

Catherine looked around at the growing crowd. "My lover will find me. Now go, both of you."

The siren sounded in the distance. Heat uncurled in her body. She had to have a man, and soon.

The murmurs died when they reached the next street. After reaching the cover of darkness between two streetlamps, he leaned over and ran his tongue over her lips.

A surge of pure desire tore through her. Moisture trickled between her legs, dampening her pants further. She wanted to tear them off and have him take her now.

Hugh raised his head. "I couldn't take anyone else either."

It gave her scant satisfaction that he suffered as well. "Why did you come after me?"

"Catherine told me you were willing to compromise."

Her hopes sank.

Hugh's eyes went soft. "Please give me time."

She didn't want to tell him he almost had. Yet to give in to compromise could give him the excuse to slip into the familiar of having her month after month.

It hurt to say it. "I'll wait for you."

His eyes brimmed with passion. "I promise I'll not leave you, no matter how long I take."

As much as she wanted to have him fully, she had to accept this was what he needed. Time she feared she didn't have.

The child near the lake returned with painful

clarity. "Remember the family near the lake."

He nodded.

"I want all those things, eventually, with you. I don't have a century to waste waiting. Heck. I don't even have five years. Don't you see my dilemma?"

"I don't think so. Being part *lamia*, you could live far longer."

The thought had crossed her mind, but until now she'd not considered the implication. "I don't want to live like...this for decades."

Shaking his head, he released her. "I need to think."

Idiot. Why had she pushed him when he was prepared to seriously consider a long-term relationship with her?

The slow burning inside her was becoming unbearable.

Desire flashed in his eyes. *That* part of the arrangement would not be hard at all.

"Let's go to your place," she said, forcing down the raging desire that threatened to consume her.

* * * *

Closing the door of his house behind him, he leaned against it. "I must have you, but not in the way you want."

Give him what he needs. There is plenty of time. "I need to get a condom."

He smiled. "I can't wait that long. Take off your pants."

REDEMPTION

She slipped them off and flung them to one side. Anything would suffice for now.

He knelt, running his finger between her legs pausing at her moist center. "You are definitely in a bad way."

She gasped.

"Widen your legs."

He breathed in her scent. "Divine."

His tongue teased her nether lips apart. Anna groaned as he suckled her clit. The familiar energy flowed from her vagina into his tongue. She wanted him inside her so desperately, it took all her will not to beg him.

Suddenly he released her. "My bed."

The bedroom was the one he never brought women to. Ann took that as a good sign. If nothing else, he was treating her as special tonight.

He must have seen her eyes widen. "Whatever happens tonight, this will be where I want you in the future."

She trembled at the words *whatever happens*. That meant possibilities. As long as she didn't pressure him into anything, he would stay.

It would have to be enough.

Hugh removed her top. Freed of restraint, he cupped her breasts, drawing a low moan from her. His hands felt so good on her skin.

"Take your shirt off."

Bare-chested, he faced her. His eyes were dark orbs of smoldering desire. The bulge in his pants grew.

"The rest. Off."

He undid his fly and with his boxer shorts, removed both in one long sweep.

Anna licked her lower lip. That he desired her was an understatement.

His cock twitched, while his face held wariness. She was going to have to be very careful to curb her impatience.

Hugh lay on the bed and rolled on his side to face her.

Leaning forward, she kissed him. His tongue caught hers, parried as she kept her thighs away from his cock. He had to trust her, being so unprotected this close.

The invasion of his tongue increased. She loved the way he teased her mouth. Hands cupped her buttocks until her thighs touched the tip of his erection. The move surprised and pleased her. His hand strayed to her throbbing mound and began to stroke it, sending a bolt of heat to her core.

With a light stroke, she touched his shaft with her fingers. He drew in a sharp intake of breath, but didn't stop her. Drawing slightly apart from him, she gripped his cock and began to move her hand up and down. He turned onto his side and lifted one leg. The openness of his body was another surprise. Was he testing her with restraint?

"Don't stop."

Anna sealed his words with a kiss, connecting her to him in a way she'd not experienced before. Wonderful waves of energy raced from her core where his thumb rubbed her mound and his fingers

REDEMPTION

worked in and out of her.

She imagined herself as a stream ebbing into his depths, releasing the pent-up desire within.

Suddenly, Hugh arched. Anna released the kiss. His face began to change into the expression of bliss. He was going to come, and soon.

Did she dare move to possess him?

An overwhelming need to do just that filled her thoughts.

Don't be an idiot, a tiny voice said.

He cupped her head with his free hand, drawing her lips back to his.

Anna moved, sending him onto his back.

Shoving her hand aside, he abruptly sat. His eyes were full of torment. "I know what you're planning. How *could* you—"

"I did nothing of the sort."

Desire crashed over his face. "Don't lie."

She sat, trembling. "You want this as badly as I do. The difference is you don't have the guts to go through with it."

You've blown it now, she screamed in her head.

Hugh gripped her wrists, and forced her to lie on her back. His gaze was full of lust. The man she knew and loved was nowhere to be seen.

She tried to wriggle free of him. "I don't want this, or you."

He increased the grip her wrist, making her wince. "I need you. Now!"

"Then take me, as a man should, or get out," she said in a low tone.

The rage that roared within him seemed to wane.

"I'd rather suffer without you than exist like this."
Even if my heart breaks in the process.

He hovered above her as if aware of what he was about to do. Shamefaced, he released her. "I'm sorry."

Caressing his trembling arm, she leaned towards him. "I have the strength to give what you want, what both of us want."

He placed his head on the pillow, his gaze towards the ceiling. "I don't think I'll ever find the courage to try."

The pain in his words hurt. If she let him go, it would be the last time she saw him. She had to know what it could be like. "Can't you show me a little?"

"How?" he asked in a strained whisper.

"If I knew that, don't you think I would have suggested it?"

He began to move. "I should go."

"Not so soon. Lie back and..."

Too late to stop him, she resorted to the one thing that would make him stay. "Okay. Pleasure me. You want to."

Leaning back on the bed, she parted her legs for him.

In moments he was between her legs, suckling her moisture as it would be his last drink. Anna writhed beneath him, hating her weakness but seeing no other option available to her. Orgasm after orgasm crashed over her until she could take no more, but he was voracious.

Darkness threatened to take her, sink her into

REDEMPTION

oblivion. Then a sense of peace filled her as consciousness began to wane.

Distant, she heard him. "Oh, my love. What have I done to you?"

Drifting into oblivion had never seemed sweeter. No more dreams. No more desire. She didn't want to fight it.

Hugh's words faded into a fog of mist. It felt good here.

"Anna." The words came from very far away. She ignored it, determined to reach oblivion.

* * * *

A bolt of energy coursed up her vagina and into her whole body, forcing her to return. Dimly aware that he may be healing her, she fought. Why go back to that misery when it was so wonderfully peaceful here?

Warm breath fell onto her neck. A warmer sensation filled her vagina.

Was he inside?

A large, warm cock was definitely inside her. She moaned as he went in full. Holding her still, he whispered. "Come with me and see what I have been afraid to show you."

The room faded.

Memories flashed in her mind with blinding clarity. She was Karla splayed on a bed, her nails scratching Hugh's back as she reached orgasm.

Something was not quite right with Karla.

Looking up through Karla's eyes to Hugh's face, she saw desperation and hope. His eyes seemed to be willing her to climax so she could give him the freedom he coveted.

Karla was fighting the crest with all her will.

She's afraid to go further.

Hugh was too consumed in his own need to even notice.

Slowly the crest came, as did the rapid increase in Karla's heartbeat. Energies flowed and ebbed between them, forcing Karla to a level of ecstasy she would be unable to sustain.

Unfortunately he didn't see it, and there was nothing Anna could do to stop him.

As her host's heart ceased to beat, Hugh's face faded.

What have I done? he screamed in her mind.

I am not Karla.

Nooo.

What was wrong with him? Couldn't he see her?

It's Anna, she roared into his mind.

Pain filled her vision, then it faded. She was back in her bed, with Hugh buried deep inside her. Save for a faintest breath on the nape of her neck, he wasn't moving at all.

Her love was enough, but her heart wasn't. That was why she hesitated. And hoped somewhere out there Hugh heard her.

Still nothing. Had he gone too far and couldn't come back?

Anna grabbed the spark as it was about to go out.

REDEMPTION

No, you don't. She embraced it into her being, cradling it with love.

Slowly it took hold, and grew into lines of every color imaginable.

Just as in her painting, she had connected with him, fully and completely, in a way Karla had been unable to do.

The images she had of him weren't only of drowning, but also of saving him.

He stirred behind her. *I saw it all, now finish it.*

One deep thrust, and she climaxed. Hugh moaned as he released into her. Warmth filled not only her vagina, but her whole being. She saw herself briefly through Hugh's eyes. She was truth, beauty and all he had sought.

She felt no different. Had they failed?

Hugh raised his head, his face flushed. "I thought she didn't want me to become mortal. I—"

Anna stroked his sweaty shoulder. "She loved you enough to die for you, but her heart was too weak."

He eyes brimmed with tenderness and wonder. "I had no idea."

"You see. I was worth the risk."

Laughing softly, he kissed her forehead. "I was so wrong to doubt you."

"It doesn't matter now."

His expression became serious. "Has it worked?"

She didn't sense any erotic dream at all. "I can't sense Catherine or any other tonight."

"Nor can I. I think this is going to take some getting used to, not being able to connect to

Catherine.”

The frown on his face meant it would be hard, but she could help him there. After eight years of torment, the pressure to be fucked senseless had gone. All she felt was a desire, different and yet so normal. She ran her fingernail down his chest, stopping at his shaft. “Not all of the desire has gone.”

The smile on his lips reached his eyes. “I can see that. Should we do something about it?”

Tangling his hair between her fingers, she smiled back. “Yes, my love, you should.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Australia, Sarah has been writing stories on and off for as long as she can remember. She lives in Queensland with her husband, who is very supportive of her ever-changing work lifestyle. Her other life is writing for organizations, but writing fantasy and SF is a lot more fun.

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