Hush-Hush (Doomed Cases Book 0)

by

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I was staring at the long white stick, trying to convince myself that I was still dreaming. Two tiny lines in the small box had just told me that the test was absolutely positive and there was no going back. My heart began racing away, but this time the realisation of what was about to come hit me harder than any other time. I exhaled sharply and glanced back at about a dozen other white sticks that were spread on the bathroom floor.

Now I was suffering the consequences of my stupidity. Ricky, my best mate, had warned me to be careful countless times, but I chose not to listen. I never truly believed that I would ever be ready for this moment, and now it was the beginning of my end.

In the past three days I had taken at least twenty pregnancy tests and each one of them came back positive.

It was official—I didn’t even have to go to the doctor—I was expecting a baby; there was a tiny creature growing in my stomach, a brand new life.

The father of this child was unknown.
My long-winded affair with the royal prince was done and dusted. Arthur and I hadn’t slept together for exactly twenty-two days, two hours and seven seconds. He was away when I got fired, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t expect him to find me. I was only someone that filled his time.

What happened was in the past now. My new life was slowly falling apart. I had no job, no stable home, and on top of that I was going to be a mother.

The white stick fell out of my hand, down to the tiles. I slid down, covering my face with my hands, forcing myself not to cry.

Once I got fired from the royal court, I went through a partying phase. I had decided to travel for a bit and stopped in a few cities around the UK. I was sleeping around, first with random humans and then with even more random demons. Most of these past few weeks seemed blurry. I was high on magic, lost in sorrow and despair. Despite everything that I promised to myself, I had fallen in love with Arthur, the man that could never be mine.

Now I was regretting the fact that I ever thought working for the royal family could change my life for the better.

The space around me was dirty, dated, and bugs were crawling out of the sink. It smelt like someone had left a dead body in here and forgotten about it. My head started spinning, and before I knew it, I began throwing up. The darkness was creeping to the edge of my vision.

Ronan already knew what was happening. Now I finally understood that look on his face. He must have felt the shift of energies in my body, the new waves of magic.
Once I was done emptying my stomach, I sat back and took a few deep breaths, resting my head against the wall. Ronan had settled down in this small fishing village up north several years ago. We had been corresponding in the past, and a couple of days ago I showed up on his doorstep out of the blue, hoping that he could keep me safe for now. Ronan was the only demon that lived in this area, amongst retired humans and people that desired a quiet life, away from the crowded city.

A moment later there was a knock on the bathroom door. I exhaled sharply and told him to come in.

In the past twenty-two days I thought that I was invincible, that I could sleep around with anyone and not worry about the consequences. This was the only way that I could shut down the voices in my head, shut down the pain. Arthur’s face faded away as I lifted myself back on my feet.

“What are you going to do, Maxine?” Ronan asked, staring down at me with his gleaming demonic eyes.

I couldn’t feel my limbs all of a sudden. My energy was boiling inside me and my skin felt like it was burning. Maybe this had something to do with the fact that I was carrying a mongrel baby in my stomach. I needed to get used to the fact that I would be feeling like this for the next eight months and a bit.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled back, unable to think about the future. In my short life I never even considered being a mother; it wasn’t something that ever crossed my mind. Work had filled most of my time, and then Arthur came along. I lost my head for him and fell into despair when it ended.
Ronan frowned and stepped aside, like he was letting me know that I couldn’t keep hiding in the bathroom forever. This situation had to be dealt with, sooner rather than later.

“Maxine, if this child has even a drop of royal blood inside it, then your life is in grave danger.”

His statement sent a chill down my spine, but I knew that it was true. The demonic world wouldn’t accept the fact that Arthur slept with me willingly. The faction would believe that I had planned this from the very beginning in order to change the way mongrels were portrayed in the demonic world.

I got up and left the bathroom, knowing that I only had myself to blame for this. I didn’t use any contraception. I wasn’t even trying to be careful, so now I had it. The pregnancy was expected, and Ronan was right. If this child was Arthur’s, my days on earth were numbered. Hell fully controlled royals. Any demons that had any kind of relationship with them were fully vetted beforehand.

An illegitimate mongrel royal baby would cause havoc on earth. The child would be taken away from me straight away and I would be sent down to hell. My options were limited, and I knew what Ronan was thinking, but I couldn’t bring myself to even think about it.

There was a living being inside me and even though this creature could cost me my life, I wasn’t prepared to kill it.

“Yes, you don’t need to say it. I realise what might happen to me, but I have no idea who the father is. Before I got here, I went through a crazy phase,” I told him, knowing that he most likely already suspected that.
The morning sickness had triggered my need to find out what was wrong with me. I never believed that mongrels could reproduce with humans. Okay, maybe I had been very naive, not thinking about protection, but my heart was shattered. I was ready for anything, just so I didn’t have to experience this agonising pain day by day.

“That’s why you’re still drinking liquid magic? Do you know that this stuff is addictive? Besides, you have to start thinking about your options,” he reminded me.

Ronan lived on the outskirts of the village, in an old cottage that he bought when he moved here after leaving his service at the royal palace. After I was nearly locked up by human police I decided to come here. Arthur had been deployed to Afghanistan a couple of weeks ago, and I needed a place to hide. There was a possibility that he hired someone to look for me, to find out if I was all right.

He could never know about this child, even if it was his. I was ready to sacrifice myself in order to protect him. My world wasn’t his, and I needed to remember that.

“I appreciate everything that you have done for me, you need to stop judging me. I’m in agony and the magic helps. Right at this moment I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I said, wondering if there were any elixirs that could tell me who fathered my child.

“No, Maxine, we both know that there isn’t such a thing,” Ronan replied, reading my mind. “Get it together and start thinking about your future.”

I began chewing my lips, dismissing everything he’d said.

Ronan and I met in one of the bars in London, when I was still a mouthy teenager with an attitude. At the time Ronan had a job in the palace. He was a butler for Princess Catherine. I tried to steal from him and nearly succeeded. Ronan cornered
me in the alley and told me that I didn’t have to waste my potential. He offered to give me some lessons so I could tame my wild energy. We had been friends ever since. To this day I have no idea why he decided to give me a shot. Maybe he pitied me. A young orphan that never had a real role model.

I felt embarrassed that I didn’t know who fathered my child. It could have been that red-haired human from the nightclub, or maybe it was that good-looking demon that outplayed me in the poker game. There was also that dark-haired bartender from an obscure pub around the corner from the Brixton tube station. I hated myself that I became so weak, so lonely.

My life had spun out of control.

After I rinsed off my face, I went back to hide in my room. Ronan had kindly offered me the spare bedroom that he’d used for storage in the past few years. We had a mutual understanding and I was truly lucky that I had a friend in Ronan. Everyone who’d ever spent any time with me knew that I wasn’t very maternal, so my decision was supposed to be easy. Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to ask Ronan to create that one potion for me that could solve all my problems. I still had a bit of time.

I shook my head and started counting the days from my last period. It’d been more than six weeks and I’d been so focused on my misery that I hadn’t even realised what was going on. I sat on the bed, pulled my knees forward, and began to wonder about my future. This child was a blessing, but for me it was a death sentence if it turned out that Arthur was the father. Either way, my future was already doomed.

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I didn’t sleep much that night, well like most nights. Ronan was busy with his potion business. Humans from the village believed that he was an eccentric quack. He made friends over the years and people liked him.

Ronan was a full-blooded demon, part of Asmodeus faction, and he never embraced technology.

After being stuck in his remote cottage for days, I decided to go out and get some fresh air.

I kept thinking about Arthur, about our time together, about his dreams and aspirations. All my thoughts were about him and I was so desperate that I was ready to stalk him online.

The village had two pubs, a shop, and there was a coffee shop with internet access. I arrived here in order to forget, and instead I was prepared to cyber stalk someone that could ruin me.

It was strange knowing that I was now responsible for another being, another creature.

The sea breeze ruffled my long ponytail. I tucked my jacket tighter around my waist, feeling cold as I walked along the country road. The dramatic cliffs soared in the distance. My stomach was rumbling, but food wasn’t on my list of priorities right then. I needed to find out what Arthur had been up to. I had to know if he tried to look for me.
Minutes later I passed two elderly ladies. They greeted me like they knew me, but I could read in their thoughts that deep down they wondered if I was the girl that Ronan was talking about a couple of nights ago.

I managed to locate the coffee shop, paid five pounds to the owner, and sat down with a stale scone in front of the laptop several minutes later. Mr. Gordon offered to show me a quick drink that I politely declined. I wasn’t particularly tech savvy, but I knew how to use the computer. I didn’t like technology, but this was the only other way of keeping up with the outside world.

I typed Arthur’s name into Google and stopped breathing for a second. My palms began sweating as the energy stirred around me when an article about him popped up on the screen. The months of living like we were in a fairytale were finally over. Now I was sitting here, hundreds of miles away from home, stalking him online and telling myself that this was normal. After scanning the text a few times, I found out that Arthur was due to be back to London in three months, and that he was all right and safe. Part of me was relieved, the other pissed off that it came to this.

I had never been in love, well, I never thought that it was possible for me to get attached to anyone, especially a human, but it happened.

The endless nights that I had spent with others changed me, shifted my perspective of love. Sleeping around wasn’t something that I wanted or planned, but when I was in someone else’s arms, intoxicated on magical tequila, Arthur wasn’t part of me anymore.

My throat was raw and I was heartbroken, but I chose not to drink anymore when I found out I was pregnant.
The owner brought me a warm cup of coffee ten minutes later. The internet was filled with information about royals in general. Apparently young Prince Georgie was partying hard in Dubai, not caring about his reputation at all.

I took a bite of the scone, hoping to tame my rumbling stomach for the time being, when another article caught my eye. I opened the page feeling the rising excitement. As soon as I started reading it, something inside me snapped and anger blinded me for a second. The source claimed that Arthur was planning to propose to Natalie Morgan as soon as he was back from Afghanistan.

My breathing became laboured and my limbs went slightly stiff. Arthur had gone out with Natalie on a number of occasions, and Princess Layla had always hoped that eventually they would end up together.

I shut down everything, knowing there was no point in reading on. The tiny voice in my head reminded me that he was never mine in the first place. This article was the final nail in the coffin.

I had to forget about him and concentrate on my future. The child was mine and I needed to make a difficult decision. I was ready to tell Ronan that I had made up my mind.
Chapter Two

I was pissed when I left the coffee shop, mainly with myself and mainly with the fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about what happened.

I stepped outside and then started running. My feet didn’t take me far. I had to stop several meters later and throw up on the side of the road. This time it wasn’t the morning sickness but the fact that Arthur had managed to turn his life around and forget about me already.

It was time to stop feeling sorry for myself and fight through this misery. I couldn’t bring this unexpected baby into this world. I never thought that I could cry over a man, and now here I was.

When I stopped being violently sick and was able to stay on my feet again, I started walking back to the cottage. My head throbbed with agonising pain, my vision was blurry. Everything about my existence felt shitty and pointless. The truth was that I wasn’t capable of looking after myself, much less a newborn child. I had no stable home, no income, and I didn’t know if I could fully commit myself to being a parent.
If Arthur only knew that there was even a slight possibility that he could be a father he’d condemn my plans. I shook my head, slapping myself hard. Yeah, I had to move forward and shut down the nostalgic voices in my head. This decision was mine and there was nothing that anyone could say that would change my mind.

Ronan came home around nine o’clock in the evening. The days were longer in the summer and I spent time sitting outside, trying to stay positive. I had been thinking about what to do next, long and hard, so after exhausting a few hours I welcomed him at the door.

I had to consider talking to Ricky too. He wouldn’t approve of my decision. Well, he most likely would try to talk me out of it. I needed to remind myself that Ricky had stood beside me since we set up the business together, and his opinion meant a great deal to me.

“What is it, Maxine? I don’t have the time for a chat. Mrs. Robinson is waiting for her parcel,” Ronan said, passing me on the way to the kitchen. As usual he was in a hurry, but I had to tell him what I decided.

“Ronan, I’m ready to go through with what we discussed earlier on. I need your help,” I blurted out, almost shaking. He finally stopped and turned around. His eyes were gleaming again, and there was a hint of relief in his expression.

“Be more clear, Maxine,” he said.

“Termination. I need to not be pregnant, Ronan,” I hissed, feeling so incredibly guilty and disappointed. I was a terrible person even thinking about abortion. Maybe one day Lucifer would get his hands on me, and I would get punished for all my sins, but right now I was ready for anything in order to stay on earth, to survive.
Ronan exhaled sharply and his eyes flickered at the corners. He approached me slowly and then placed his palms on my arms.

“What made you change your mind?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve made my decision. My life is miserable enough and I’m not ready to bring a child into this world even if there is only a slight chance that Arthur could be the father,” I said, lying to him and myself. It was much easier to decide after learning that he was finally happy in his own life.

“There is a way, but we have to use magic. Are you absolutely sure that you want to do this?” he asked, like he needed to torture me a bit longer.

“Yes, Ronan, I’m sure,” I said. “So tell me when?”

“Tonight. We leave at midnight. Concentrate on your demonic energy because you’ll need it. I have to be somewhere soon, wait for me in the cottage,” he told me, grabbed a box from the cupboard, and left me alone again.

I wished that I could not feel guilty, but the voice of reason kept reminding me that I had to keep on living. Ricky was my friend and I was supposed to prepare him for the worst. Ronan didn’t have a phone and my mobile was off. I wanted to be unreachable in case other demons tried to track me down.

My fingertips sparkled when I went up to take a shower. For a moment I stood in the water wondering what the hell was wrong with me. I made this baby, so it was my responsibility to take care of it. I couldn’t simply kill it. Soon my thoughts were interrupted by a foreign energy that rolled through my spine. There was a demon nearby and I knew for a fact that it wasn’t Ronan. No one apart from Ricky knew where I was, so I automatically got suspicious.
I put some clothes on and opened the door, spreading violent energy around the cottage. After walking around for ten minutes strongly, I couldn’t detect anyone. Maybe my paranoia had reached a new level or maybe I truly wanted to be found.

The stranger’s energy stayed with me until Ronan arrived home. He didn’t seem to sense anyone, so I didn’t say anything. He’d lived alone for so long and now I had to adapt to his old eccentric ways.

“What should I expect tonight?” I finally asked when the clock on the wall pointed at eleven o’clock.

“Expect some pain. There is a special ritual that we have to follow, and only Sonia can produce such a strong potion,” Ronan said. I sighed loudly and began asking myself if this was exactly what I wanted.

The physical pain, yeah, I could deal with that, but the emotional one was pulling me under the grave, disturbing my healing process.

“So who is this woman? I suspect she is a demon, right?” I asked, rubbing my hands over my old jeans. My gut all of a sudden was filled with heavy bricks and I felt even shittier than earlier.

Ronan changed his clothes and now was wearing mostly black. I felt on edge. Even my demonic energy seemed on alert.

“Sonia is extremely knowledgeable. She’s a mongrel like you. Hell has been hunting her for as long as I can remember, so she moves around often,” Ronan explained, packing odd-looking flasks into his bag. Well, that didn’t sound great. I was supposed to trust a mongrel that had been on the run for God knew how long. At the same time I had no other choice. I couldn’t keep this baby.
Maybe in the future I would feel guilty for the rest of my life, but right at this moment I had to think about myself and Arthur.

Half an hour later we left the cozy cottage and headed towards the coastline. I kept walking, assuring myself that this was the right thing to do. None of this seemed real, and I still hadn’t spoken to Ricky.

Ronan as usual wasn’t saying much as we passed his dearest fishing village in complete darkness. There were no humans on the streets, and somehow I was glad of that. I didn’t need to speak to anyone.

My heart began thumping faster when we moved through the fields that were situated on top of the steep cliffs. The tide was in, and with every passing minute, I began doubting myself, contemplating if there was another way. The navy sky was filled with heavy clouds.

This small little creature inside my stomach felt like it was connecting with me already.

“She will be in one of the caves, and she knows that we’re coming,” Ronan muttered, when the path began moving down towards the shore filled mainly with stones.

I swallowed hard and told myself that I needed to keep going. Right now things were difficult for me, but that didn’t mean that I couldn’t be happy some day.

The tide was coming in and strong waves beat against the rocky shore. There were long steep cliffs on each side. In front of us there were just blocks of rocks, and I really wasn’t sure where he was taking me.

As soon as we approached the end of the rocks, Ronan turned around.
“The strong tides shape caves on the outside, so we have to get slightly wet to find Sonia,” he informed me. I didn’t want to be here, but right now bailing out wasn’t something that I was ready to do. Ronan moved his man bag to the other side of his shoulder and started climbing through the rocks along the cliff.

We didn’t get slightly wet, we got soaked with seawater. The tide was going to be high this evening. Along the coast, as we climbed higher, finally reaching the cave that was shaped by strong current, dangerous rocks stuck out from each side. I saw a light as we moved closer. My demonic soul detected a mongrel close by.

Sonia must have used magic in order to create this space for herself. In the distance, any boat would notice the light, so this cave wasn’t a particularly great hiding place, but her magic was possibly much more advanced. Sonia was using very particular spells, and this wasn’t the best time or place to start asking questions.

By the time we both were inside, Ronan’s breath was laboured. It was a hell of a trip, even for a tough older guy like him. I was freezing cold, ready to skip the introductions and just get on with the task. Ronan’s expression was as usual unreadable.

“So you found me. Deep down I thought you wouldn’t.” The voice of a woman startled me slightly. She stood hidden underneath the rock. Sonia, the half demon that Ronan told me about appeared to be in her late forties. She had long dark hair and sharp Nordic features.

Ronan released some of his protective energy, and I tried to relax. The demon that stood in front of me was supposed to help me get rid of the problem. She had red
eyeshadow above her hazel eyes, wide cheeks and narrow lips. She was dressed in ordinary clothes, old jeans and a long sleeve dirty shirt.

My instincts reminded me that my options were limited. I couldn’t risk bringing the mongrel baby into this world, the tiny creature that could possibly have royal blood in its veins.

“You forgot that I know this area better than anyone,” Ronan stated, dropped the bag, and embraced Sonia in a strong but friendly hug. I scratched my head, wondering what the hell this was about, but kept my opinions to myself. They obviously must have known each other from the past.

“How are you doing, my old friend?” she asked, once they were no longer embracing. “And who is the scruffy half demon?”

“Hey, I’m standing right here,” I barked, and her eyes gleamed. Okay, so I was wet, my clothes were dirty, and my hair all over the place, but still she didn’t have to be rude.

“Maxine, this is Sonia,” Ronan introduced us, ignoring his friend’s comment. “She’s here because we need your help with a particular case.”

I wanted to laugh that he called my misfortune a case, but Ronan had lost his sensitive nature when he stopped working for the royals.

I looked around the cave, seeing that she must have slept in the corner on some old clothes. The cave was lit with candles, and there were flasks, herbs, and some dead insects on the small table. Sonia seemed settled here. I didn’t know her story, but Ronan mentioned that she was hiding, and living like that only confirmed it.
“You’re expecting a mongrel baby,” she said, walking around me. Her energy was powerful, rising fast and linking with my own.

Cold shivers crawled over my spine when she mentioned the baby. I had no idea how she knew, how she suspected that I had slept with a human.

“Yes, I am and my situation is complicated. Ronan mentioned that you can help me to get rid of it,” I said, already hating myself for it, for treating it like an unnecessary burden. God, I was terrible. Her eyes gleamed even more, and she smiled.

“Well, that’s my expertise, but I don’t think that you’re fully convinced you are ready for it,” she stated, like she was reading my mind.

“I can’t keep it,” I insisted, feeling even more conflicted about everything.

“Does the father know?”

“I’m not quite sure who is the father,” I added, wanting to be done talking about it.

I felt like this was a job interview.

“Ronan, take a seat,” she said. “I have to prepare a certain potion. If she is sure, then we can proceed.”

My stomach made a funny jolt filling with dread. Ricky would have talked me out of it, but there was no time. I had a feeling that Sonia wasn’t planning to stay in here for long.

She went to the table and started mixing stuff, mumbling formulas that didn’t make much sense. Images of Arthur and all the other men that I had hooked up with in the past began rolling through my mind.
I started pacing around the cave, aware of the rising power that circulated around, growing with my heartbeat. If someone had said several months ago that I would be sitting in the cave on the outskirts of some remote village trying to find a way to get rid of the baby that I was carrying inside, I wouldn’t have believed it. Now it was my doomed reality.

I knew that I wouldn’t be able to look myself in the mirror once the deal was done.

“The potion is done. Now you just have to drink it and forget about it. The magic will do what it is supposed to,” she said. I looked at her then, realising that the moment had come. I stood up ready to make a decision, ready to kill an innocent human being.
Chapter Three

The seconds rolled by and I still wasn’t saying anything. Sonia was holding something in her hand, a stone of some sorts. Earlier on she placed an empty cup on the wooden table that was now steaming with strong magic. The smell of rosemary and other rare herbs wafted through the cave.

I couldn’t believe that I just had to drink it and the whole problem would go away in a heartbeat. This wasn’t something that I anticipated. Sonia’s eyes were penetrating, and she was seeing through me, seeing that deep down I wasn’t sure if I was ready.

Back in London everyone that had ever known me understood that not many things could break me. I had worked for royals, I had protected them, and now I was just about to fall apart.

“There is a formula that you have to whisper while you drink it,” Sonia added, dropping the stone into her pocket. Ronan was aware that I was undecided. He released some calming vibes towards me, telling me that I could go back to normal as soon as I drank the potion. He obviously wanted me to go ahead with this abortion.
The prince and I were done, so I had nothing to worry about, and I couldn’t be a hundred percent sure if the child was his.

“And that’s it? What will happen to the fetus?” I asked stupidly already knowing the answer. Deep down I still needed to absorb all the details. Going through pros and cons didn’t give me any confidence. I had to save myself, and giving birth to this baby could send the whole of hell into havoc.

And if the child was Arthur’s, my future was shaky at best. Sleeping with a royal wasn’t a crime, but creating a half-blooded royal could cause a lot of problems to authorities in hell.

Sonia shifted her weight to the side and pursed her lips. Obviously she didn’t like that I was hesitating. I wished that I’d brought a strong drink with me. Ronan came here with me, introduced me to this woman. That one drink could make me normal again, so what was I waiting for?

“The magic will destroy the fetus, you will throw up a few times, possibly bleed too, but tomorrow morning you won’t be pregnant,” she informed me, then went to the table and picked up the drink for me.

This time I took the cup, feeling violent magic scorching through me instantly. The potion was powerful.

I thought about Arthur once again. We had talked about children, and I knew that at some point he wanted to be a father. Maybe in different circumstances we could have created a real family, but I had to remember that as long as he was a prince this was impossible.
I held on to the magic, squeezing the cup harder. The time stretched, and my thoughts started racing again. This was simple, but the pain was greater. It spread everywhere, burning me like a fresh wound.

The energies stirred inside me and I wished that I could be somewhere else.

“Right, I don’t think your girl is ready to get rid of this child, Ronan, and you know how much I hate wasting my time,” Sonia barked, taking a step towards me.

Tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to cry in front of them. What the hell was wrong with me? I came here to kill the creature that would have a tough life anyway, but I just couldn’t go through with it.

All the tiny voices in my head were screaming at me that there was no other way, that from now on I would have to keep living with this secret forever.

“Maxine, I thought you decided, that you had gone through your pros and cons?” Ronan asked, sounding angry all of a sudden. I clenched my teeth, knowing that he genuinely wanted to help me, but right then I couldn’t pull myself together.

I finally lifted my head, swallowing the tears away, and placed my hand on my stomach.

“I can’t do this. I’m sorry, but this child will have to be born,” I stated, knowing that it was my sacrifice. Ronan and Sonia most likely thought that I was stupid, but I wasn’t ready to become a monster. Arthur would remain my long-lost love, forever.

“A weak soul. Mongrel children are very challenging, dear, so you really have to think about this. And please don’t think that father will help you in any way. Human men aren’t ready for that kind of news,” Sonia stated and Ronan narrowed his eyes at her, like he disapproved of what she said.
“Maxine is not quite sure who fathered her child,” Ronan said.

“Well, you might sense it later on. As the fetus becomes more active, the mother can glimpse memories from the past,” Sonia explained, sounding bored. It was obvious that she never had kids. She seemed cold and detached.

My head hurt as memories about Arthur resurfaced. Now I had to come up with a new plan. After all, I wanted to keep this child, not even knowing if I was capable of raising it.

I had to get out of here and speak to Ricky. There was no way that I could get back to London, unless …

“Just a word of advice,” Sonia interrupted my train of thought.

“Yes?” I asked, realising that either way I needed to stay with Ronan for another eight months and a bit.

“Stop thinking that it might work out with the human. They are the weak link within demonic society. You’re on your own. The sooner you realise that, the stronger you will become.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” I added, then turned around ready to disappear. I didn’t wait for Ronan. He had to respect my decision and let me get on with it. We were friends, and he was ready to help me earlier on. I left the cave, moving through the rocky shore, petrified that now everything could turn against me.

Was I weak?

Maybe, but I couldn’t go through with this abortion.
I couldn’t become a woman that was too scared to face the consequences of unprotected sex. It was then or never, and I chose to risk everything for someone that wasn’t even born yet.

When I came back to the cottage it was just after one in the morning. Ronan had chosen to stay with Sonia. They obviously had other matters to discuss, and their relationship was none of my business. I went over everything, and I told myself that I had made my choice. I had options, but instead of thinking about what was next, I took my phone and dialled Ricky’s number.

“Wow, Maxine, I thought you said that you wouldn’t be in touch? Is everything okay?” he asked as soon as he answered the phone.

I took a deep breath and squeezed my phone, cutting the blood circulation to my fingers. My throat felt tight, but I had to tell him everything. He was the only one that could understand what I was thinking.

“I tried to have an abortion, Rick. Ronan took me to this female demon, but I couldn’t do it,” I said, getting straight to the point. There was a silence on the other side of the phone.

“He talked you into it, didn’t he?” Ricky asked throwing accusations straight away. My voice was lost, but I had to keep going and tell him exactly what I was planning.

“No. Ronan only did what I asked for. I was stupid, thought this would solve everything, but eventually I backed away,” I told him. “That demon female
mentioned that I might figure out who the father is later when the baby will be more active.”

“I’ve heard about it, but that won’t change the fact that you’re going to be a mother, Maxine. What if Arthur is the actual father of your child?”

I rubbed my forehead, wanting to stick to everything I planned to tell him. Yeah, I was following my emotions earlier on, made a rushed decision, but in the end the child had to have a good start in life.

“I will find someone that will take care of it, Ricky, possibly adoption. We both know that I’m not mother material. I can barely take care of myself.”

“It’s different now, but once you hold this creature in your arms your perspective will change. Don’t jump hoop yet, Maxine, think about it,” he muttered and I sensed that he wanted to say more, but he was hesitating.

“What’s wrong, Ricky? Is it the business?” I pressed, really missing him and the agency. After I got fired from the palace we lost a lot of clients, but Ricky was smart. He could get everything back up and running in no time.

“Arthur came to my place a few times before he left for Afghanistan.”

My heart made a happy dance in my chest, covering the fact that earlier on I was slowly dying, thinking that I would never see him again. The sudden pain came back like an arrow, piercing through my heart.

I didn’t say anything, waiting for him to continue. There was probably more. Well, it looked like he cared a little.

“He wanted to know what happened to you. He got violent a few times,” Ricky continued, sounding normal. He would never betray me or reveal my location. We
had an understanding, and I knew that I had to dismiss Arthur’s efforts. He was far away right now, thousands of miles away in a foreign country. “The guy still loves you, and I don’t know, maybe you should have tried talking to him.”

I hated when Ricky got emotional.

“Don’t try to make me feel better. We are done. My whole career is ruined. It’s better this way,” I insisted, remembering how humiliated I was standing in front of the Queen and her entourage.

“He showed up drunk, and hurt. For the first time I felt bad for the guy. He genuinely had no idea what happened.”

My mind was spinning, but I kept telling myself that Ricky was wrong. Arthur knew that I got fired from my post. We were done fooling around and I had risked enough. It was time to stop thinking about that and concentrate on my unborn child.

“I don’t care. This would never work anyway. Ricky, I’m staying here until I give birth. No one can know, do you understand?”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. You’re like my family, Max, and I’m behind you a hundred percent,” he added, like he was saying that he would help me take care of this child, but that was highly unlikely.

“I know that, but I’m scared and lost.”

“Don’t be. You’re Maxine, the toughest and most unbreakable woman that I ever knew. You will be fine,” Ricky said, pumping me with positivity. I smiled to the phone, thinking that this was what I needed. I hung up several minutes later, realising that he was right. I could do this. I could be a mother despite the odds.
Several weeks had passed since my conversation with Ricky, and I stayed hidden, not doing much at all. After some time I told myself that I had to show Ronan a bit more gratitude. He took me into his home while he tried carrying on with his own life, at the same time looking after all my needs. It was a big ask especially for someone who didn’t like people very much.

It was odd being pregnant. I was sick all the time until the first trimester had finally passed. Every day I kept staring at my stomach, wondering what I would do when my due day arrived. My demonic energy shifted, and I had been lighting stuff up randomly pretty much all the time.

Being a half demon I couldn’t go with the standard adoption, and on top of that I was stuck in this small village with no way of getting out. I was afraid of being recognised, even being as far away from London as possible.

Ronan kept shaking his head every time he looked at me. I was getting heavier and the months began disappearing, but my pain remained.

I still remembered when I felt the baby’s movement for the first time. I was overjoyed with the fact that I didn’t drink that potion.

My days were filled mostly with reading and staring out the window. Ronan asked me not to hang around in the village any longer, especially when I started showing. Everyone knew Ronan, he had a quite a reputation in the village, and he just didn’t want people to talk.
It was two weeks later when I woke up late at night with the awareness that Watchers were close by. This never happened to me before, and I never thought that they could find me in a place like this, but five seconds later I was standing on my feet ready to run.

The baby was kicking continuously and the fear scorched through me instantly. It was clear that they had tracked me down and it was time for me to disappear.

Suddenly images of a man from my past assaulted my mind. In that moment I finally suspected the true identity of the baby’s father.
I shot out of the bed and ran downstairs, knowing that my time was limited. The Watchers couldn’t have known that I was hiding here. They must have been patrolling this area off chance, hoping to find a demon that wasn’t supposed to be living amongst humans.

I paced around the kitchen for a moment, thinking about what to do. I didn’t have the time or strength to use any charms, so I had to disappear. Panic pulsed through my legs. Baby was very active, moving swiftly inside my stomach.

Ronan was out; his bed was empty. There must have been a reason that Watchers showed up here in the middle of the night. Maybe I had made a mistake trusting him, but at the same time I didn’t want to believe that he could sell me out like that.

No one apart from Ricky and Ronan knew that I was here.

I shivered with cold when I opened the front door and stepped on the grass barefoot, glancing around. In the past few months I tried to stay on form, and running was the only exercise that allowed me to feel free. Now I could rely only on my legs. I started moving through the forest, thinking about Ricky and the agency.
The Watchers’ intense energy collided with mine. They were aware that I was close, and they were summoning me over to them. There was a possibility that they were working for someone that wanted to find me. No one apart from Berith himself had any power over them, but these days everything was possible.

They were aggravated that I wasn’t responding, most likely already aware that I was trying to get away. My heart was jackhammering in my chest. I was slow and vulnerable.

My feet were moving and that tiny voice in my head kept telling me to stop running and try to reason with them. Maybe in any other circumstance I would have tried that, but right then I didn’t want to take any chances. The Watchers would have sensed that I was carrying a mongrel baby inside my womb. Then the uncomfortable questions would follow, and I wasn’t ready to reveal anything about my past.

I was moving fast through the bushes, circulating between the trees, my breath laboured. The energy surfaced all over, making me slightly dizzy.

Where was Ronan when I needed him the most?

After so many years he was still the only person apart from Ricky that I trusted with all my heart. I didn’t believe that he had anything to do with them. There had to be a traitor, someone that wanted to see me in hell.

Sweat dripped down my face. I stopped for a second and listened in. I heard voices behind me. My lungs were burning and the forest seemed to be getting darker and wilder.
A year ago I probably would have escaped easily, but right then I was eight months pregnant and already exhausted. My demonic energy boosted my strength a little, but my body indicated that I had to stop and rest.

The Watchers wanted to use their energy against my will. I was most likely the only other mongrel in the area, and by running I had given them a reason to chase after me.

Moments later I stumbled, missing a protruding rock, and falling facedown on the ground. Burning pain shot over my leg, but I ignored it. I instantly touched my stomach, making sure the baby was all right. I thought that the chase was over, the Watchers were too close, when something else, or rather someone else caught my attention.

There was a woman standing by the tree, staring back at me. She had a basket in her right hand. I pushed myself back on my knees, breathing hard. Her dark eyes moved over my silhouette, stopping on my stomach. The Watchers were closing in on me.

She must have sensed them too because suddenly I felt her energy circulating around me. Hell, I had no idea what she was, but for sure she wasn’t a demon. Even in the darkness her features were extraordinary, her magic reviving.

“We need to get close to each other. They won’t be able to sense you this way,” she told me. I hesitated for a second, wondering if I could trust her. In the end of the day I had no other option, so I obeyed her. I couldn’t carry on running.
I dragged myself off the ground, and then she came closer. I didn’t know what happened after that, but she covered us both with her dark cloak, whispered some words and leaned down to me.

“Don’t move; they won’t be able to notice us. My magic will protect us.”

I wanted to argue, but the Watchers’ energy surrounded the place all of a sudden. Paralysing fear spread through me quickly, tightening my throat. A moment later two Watchers emerged from the trees in their true forms. Their snow-white wings were impressive, shining in the darkness.

One of them was tall and slender, and his blue eyes moved over the space, stopping right on me.

That was it. I was going down. There was no way that this woman could make me suddenly invisible, but I forced myself to stop breathing for a few long moments.

“I lost her demonic soul,” he stated. I nearly screamed holding my stomach when the baby kicked hard. It obviously didn’t like me in any distress.

The other Watcher looked around; he was disorientated.

“She must be close. She’s just a mongrel,” he said, dragging his hand through his hair. “Let’s move. We can’t lose her.”

The taller one shook his head, and a moment later they carried on walking through the forest.

I couldn’t believe it. Somehow they weren’t able to see me. This was impossible. The woman’s arm was on my back and her magic felt unbelievable. The Watchers had disappeared, but we stayed under her cloak for few more minutes until I could breathe normally again.
“Thank you … I can’t understand—”

“I’m a warlock. My magic is different than the magic of any ordinary demon,” she said, smiling. Only then I realised that she must have been right. I had heard about warlocks, but I never believed that they still lived on earth. It was dark, but I could still see that she had long red hair and wide green eyes.

“Thank you, if they had found me, I was as good as dead,” I explained, wondering what she wanted in exchange. There weren’t many warlocks left on an earth populated by demons. Ricky once told me that Lucifer began hunting them down years ago when they were powerful.

“I sensed your fear miles away and your child’s fear too,” she said. “I was picking up some herbs, hoping to keep away from any demons and humans.”

I stood up and felt like my legs were going to give out at any second. She caught my arms, sending me a sharp wave of energy. It was a spike that I needed, but at the same time I hated being so weak and exposed.

“I will walk you back to the safe place,” she informed me.

“They weren’t supposed to know that I was here, and my friend wouldn’t betray me like this,” I explained, feeling confused. I had no idea if it was safe for me to go back to Ronan. What if there were more Watchers waiting for me there?

“You’re trying to protect your baby, that’s understandable,” she said, and her eyes gleamed with joy.

“It’s complicated. I’ve left behind my whole life and in the end I’m still a coward,” I said, thinking about the cave and Sonia. I had wanted to kill it, just because I was willing to protect someone that wasn’t in my life anymore.
“I’ll walk with you. The Watchers are trying their chances. Sometimes they patrol these remote areas. I messed around with their sense of direction, so they won’t be able to track us down.”

I called out my demonic power, and her words instantly calmed the baby down. Every part of me indicated that I should start running, but on the other hand, this creature had just saved my life. Maybe I was simply paranoid. The Watchers weren’t here for me; they were passing this area, and then they must have sensed me. Everything was suddenly very clear.

“All right, you’re right. I should go back to the cottage. My name is Maxine, by the way,” I said. She gave me a warm smile and took my arm.

“Matilda. I was married to a demon once, and when I’m around others I tend to conceal my true nature,” she explained. “I live in this area, alone.”

“So you’re truly a warlock?” I asked, just to be sure that my own senses weren’t misleading me.

“A widowed warlock, yes,” she admitted with another smile. “Your baby is going to be due soon and you’re scared, confused about its future,” she pointed out like she was reading my mind.

We started walking thought the woodlands. It was probably very late, and Ronan was most likely looking for me.

“Isn’t that obvious? This pregnancy wasn’t planned, for sure,” I said, thinking about Arthur again. God, I really needed to get a grip and stop believing that we ever had a real shot.
“I always wanted to be a mother, but sadly warlocks aren’t able to reproduce,” she said unexpectedly. “I don’t want to be insensitive, but what’s your story? Why are you hiding here?”

I wiped the sweat off my forehead. We were alone, and I wasn’t sure if it was safe for me to talk about my past, but she seemed genuinely interested. After all, Matilda helped me get rid of the Watchers, so there was no point being secretive. Eventually they would have figured out who I was and then I would’ve had no other choice but to leave with them.

I started talking then. I didn’t know why, but I started telling her about my stupid decisions, about what happened when I got the job in the palace. The past nine months were tough. I was isolated and lonely. Maybe from Ronan’s perspective I was putting myself in danger, trusting a stranger, a warlock, but this felt natural.

Then I told her about Doomed Cases, about Ricky and Arthur. The baby was moving, but in a calm manner while I was telling her about getting dumped by the royals.

“Well, that’s a hell of a story, Maxine,” she concluded as we reached Ronan’s cottage. She was right: there was no sign of Watchers anywhere near, but Ronan himself was waiting outside.

“Where the hell have you been? I came back an hour ago and your bed was empty,” Ronan shouted when he saw me. A moment later he saw Matilda and he released some of his energy.

“Calm down, this is Matilda, she’s hidden me from two Watchers that were snooping in the area. I woke up sensing them, and panicked,” I explained.
“A warlock, well, that’s unexpected. Please come in before Maxine goes into labour at my front door,” Ronan muttered, shaking his head. It was dawn when the three of us sat down at the table with a warm cup of tea.

“I work for myself these days, run a pottery business in the middle of the forest,” Matilda explained after Ronan warmed up to her a bit more and explained that he was out hunting earlier on. “Maxine is lucky that you’re helping her. Her situation sounds complicated.”

“She should have gotten rid of that child when she had a chance. It’s a grave risk. If the child has royal blood, then her time on earth is going to be truly over.”

Ronan didn’t have to repeat that. I already knew the consequences, but in the end I couldn’t kill this little human inside me. Soon I needed to make a decision.

“This child grows inside her womb for a reason. Maxine made the right choice. You can’t condemn it. Mongrel or a human, it doesn’t matter. It’s a blessing,” Matilda stated quite fiercely.

“You’re a warlock and you have no idea what will happen to her or this child if it turns out that the royal is the father.”

“Ronan, please, this is not the time. Matilda saved me and that’s the bottom line. Let’s talk about something else,” I warned him, getting tired of his arguments. I made a commitment to myself and now he needed to accept it.

“We both know that you won’t be able to keep it, Max. Adoption is the only way forward and you haven’t found anyone suitable. This child will bring you down to hell!”
Suddenly my hormones were raging and I wanted to cry, but Ronan was right. I had been isolating myself in the past few months. Soon I was going to be holding this child in my hands knowing that I wouldn’t be able to look after it.

An awkward silence stretched for a moment. Matilda was staring back at me. It was strange that I couldn’t sense her emotions. I had never met a warlock, but it was clear that they weren’t at all like humans. I was suddenly curious about her powers.

“I will take care of it,” I mumbled, feeling less and less like myself, the tough and strong mongrel.

“Maxine, we just met, but I believe in destiny. I would be willing to look after your child. Once you give it away for adoption you will never see it again. Deep down we both know that you are not ready to give it away to strangers.”

Ronan and I looked at Matilda with sudden disbelief. A bunch of ice cubes cascaded down to my stomach, because in that moment I realised that she was right. I wasn’t willing to give my child away, despite everything that happened in the past.
Chapter Five

This whole thing seemed completely surreal. She wanted to take care of my child. I was sitting at the table staring at the woman I had just met, thinking that she couldn’t have been serious. From the very beginning I knew that arranging a legal adoption was going to be tough. Giving away my child to complete strangers was something that I never thought I’d actually go through.

“Don’t be absurd, woman. Maxine will know who fathered her child at birth, possibly later. She needs to get ready to forget about the infant as soon as possible,” Ronan said, shaking his head.

I opened my mouth to say something, but then changed my mind. Matilda kept staring at me intensely, and even though I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, I knew that she wanted to help me.

“Maxine doesn’t want to give her child away, Ronan. She’s tormented. My own life is empty and I would be honoured to look after it until Maxine figures out what to do. I don’t expect you to make a rush decision.”

Ronan pursed his lips and one of the flasks on the window exploded. Okay, so he was determined to put his point across, being the stubborn old man. Seconds later his
thoughts came through. He was telling me that I was risking too much. I needed to remind myself that he was only trying to look after me.

This woman was a warlock and trusting her like that was a mistake. Most demons didn’t even realise that warlocks existed. Ricky had told me that a few of them lived in London, but I never had a chance to face any of them. Their past was filled with mystery, but I wanted to trust Matilda.

I had thought about adoption long and hard, but deep down I still wasn’t sure. Humans wouldn’t know that the baby was special, but later the magic would interrupt their lives.

“Matilda is right, Ronan. I don’t know what to do and this new option sounds reasonable,” I finally said, playing with the ring on my finger, the ring that was supposed to symbolise my love for Arthur.

Matilda tossed her red hair behind her and touched my hand. I wanted to pull it away, but that didn’t happen. Somehow the warmth that spread through me suddenly eased the tension inside my body.

Ronan and I felt the Warlock’s magic circulating around and maybe I was crazy to even consider this, but after all, I didn’t know what else to do.

“Adoption is the way forward, Maxine, and no offence, but we don’t know anything about this woman,” Ronan pointed out, making a face.

“None taken. I understand that you’re both reluctant, but I’m happy to spend some time with Maxine until the baby is born. This way maybe you can get to trust me.”

“Do what you want, Maxine, but don’t run to me crying after this doesn’t work out. I’m washing my hands,” Ronan stated, finally getting up from the table. The sun
was rising on the horizon and I rubbed my hands over my face, trying to pull my thoughts together.

This child was a blessing, but it was also a curse if it turned out that Arthur was the father.

“Stay with me a few weeks before my due date. I’m not saying yes just yet, but this is the best solution of them all, Matilda,” I told her, pushing images of Ricky out of my head.

He could easily talk me out of it, but I had at least six more weeks to fully commit myself to this plan.

“I have been living alone for the past five years, putting a lot of hours into my business. It would be an honour for me to take care of your child. All my family is dead, and my husband is in hell. It’s a new purpose, something that would make me happy,” Matilda said and then got up too.

I didn’t say anything else, thinking that maybe this whole thing was unbelievably stupid, but deep down I trusted her already. Warlock or not, I knew that she had a good soul.

We exchanged some details and I walked her to the edge of the forest. We talked a bit more, trying to get to know each other better. Matilda left an hour later, assuring me that she would be back.

I went inside the cottage feeling conflicted and lost. The child was kicking and my internal voice was telling me that I couldn’t take it back to London and I wasn’t willing to give it out for adoption.
Matilda was my solution, possibly a miracle sent from hell. It was either that or leaving everything behind and disappearing. The problem was that I wasn’t ready to vanish just yet.

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No one else visited me, and the Watchers didn’t show up again. Matilda’s magic must have worked, and I was suddenly very glad that our paths had crossed. A few weeks before the due date I was planning to relocate, but now this was almost impossible.

Ronan believed that I was too vulnerable to move around and he wanted me to stay put, as far away from the demonic community as was possible.

Matilda came back four weeks later and after some gentle persuasion Ronan agreed to let her to stay over in the cottage. I was lucky that my and Ronan’s paths crossed years ago. Deep down I knew that he had a kind soul.

I had never had any friends. Ricky had been part of my life for as long as I remembered, so it was going to take me a while to get used to having someone around me all the time.

Matilda talked about her life, letting me into her world slowly. She was taking her time. She probably sensed that I didn’t trust many people. I wasn’t sleeping well, with thoughts about the past and Arthur keeping me up most of the time.
In the last two weeks I learnt from Matilda that warlock’s were able to produce extraordinary power: they could manipulate fire and human thoughts. Matilda was particularly good with potions and remedies. Demons had been afraid of them, only because they were afraid of their powers. Matilda had married her husband for love, but his family betrayed him.

He was taken down to hell when he tried to protect her from other demons and she had been hiding ever since.

I didn’t know how, but we connected emotionally and spiritually. Matilda was kind, caring, and she taught me to stay positive.

As the due date approached I grew more conscious about what my life would be after the birth. I spoke to Ricky again and some of the news from London caused me further aggravation. Arthur had gotten engaged to Natalie Morgan. Ricky didn’t want to talk about him, but eventually he had to tell me that the future king was finally over me.

Then, during one evening at least ten days before my due date, my water broke. I went into labour two hours later completely unprepared and petrified. Ronan was out sorting some business in the village, so I had to rely on Matilda. My energy went berserk, igniting various things in the cottage. Ronan had to use special potions to keep my powers in control. I couldn’t touch anything, my fingertips were in flames. The contractions were getting stronger. Everything changed an hour later.

Around five a.m. I started screaming at the top of my lungs, experiencing the worst pain in my life. I thought that labour wasn’t going to be that hard. Millions of
women went through it, often more than once, but I couldn’t stand the agonising pain.

“Maxine, I’ll use a little magic to help you relax.” I heard Matilda’s voice close to me.

It didn’t work, because the pain was unbelievable. Sweat was dripping down my face and I was ready to rip that child apart. I just prayed for it to stop hurting. I didn’t know how long I was in labour, but at some point Matilda told me to start pushing. Then I heard Ronan in the room too. He must have sensed my distress, so he came back.

Images of every man that I’d ever been with started moving in front of my eyes. Matilda was talking to me, and I kept screaming until the pain pushed me to release some violent vibes.

Tears mixed with sweat, and then more rippling pain. This whole thing lasted for what felt like hours, but somewhere in between my screams, pain, and sweat I finally heard the baby cry.

Everything suddenly stopped, and I experienced an explosion of colours, warmth and joy. Time ceased and nothing else mattered anymore.

Matilda had tears in her eyes and suddenly there was this tiny creature on my chest, covered with sticky white stuff. It was the most beautiful baby that I had ever seen and it was mine.

“There she is—your daughter,” Matilda whispered, wiping her tears away. I was exhausted, ready to shut down my energy, but I couldn’t physically move. The world stopped as I stared down at something so special and so precious.
My mind was spinning out of control, and I swallowed hard, wondering why on earth I ever wanted to get rid of this beautiful tiny little girl.

God, the pain didn’t matter then, well, nothing mattered.

Then she stared at me and images from the past began assaulting my mind.

I felt her heartbeat, her tiny limbs on me. She was sending me images, revealing the identity of the father. This wasn’t something that I ever expected or prepared myself for.

I opened my mouth and kept touching her, making sure that she was still real.

This little mongrel baby informed me that the future king, Prince Arthur, was her real father. This was beyond amazing and scary at the same time. In that moment I knew that my life was never going to be the same again.

“It’s true then. My dear lord, Maxine. She’s connecting with you, right?” Ronan asked, appearing next to me.

The sudden joy shifted into disappointment and anger. Either way, with or without this new knowledge I still had to give her away. I loved her instantly and unconditionally. She was stunning, but there was royal blood in her veins and that turned her into a cursed child. She needed someone that could give her all the love and devotion, something that I wasn’t able to provide myself.

I wiped my tears and pushed myself to look away. This was the worst feeling in my life. Sudden despair filled my lungs and I couldn’t catch my breath. The pain was suddenly unbearable, worse than I could have ever imagined.

“Take her, Matilda. You were right. I want you to look after her for me. I don’t know if I ever will be capable of being her parent, but for now she’s your daughter.”
Matilda understood. She touched my face and lifted the baby. She was going to be her guardian from now on. I was broken, knowing that she would be away from me, possibly forever.

I looked away knowing that there was only one thing left for me to do. I had to go back to London and try to start over—without her. Ricky was running my business and he needed all the help he could get. There was no point in me hiding anymore.

I would go back, carrying the burden of the most dangerous secret on my shoulders—a secret that could drag me back to hell if ever discovered.
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