

## Bittersweet Symphony

by F.R. Southerland

To be quite honest, there wasn't a big deal in being twenty-one. It meant she was an adult—really an adult—and there was the whole legal drinking thing, but CJ had been drinking for the last few years with the help of a fake ID. She was going to miss that.

There was some kind of excitement in it, she had to admit. Just a little. It just didn't really feel different.

“All downhill from here, kid,” Aaron had murmured, words slightly muffled with the cigarette between his lips.

“That's your opinion,” she'd shot back, all smiles because there was no way she would share in his pessimistic view.

Jamie was only marginally more optimistic, though he remained somewhat withdrawn, quiet. “Happy Birthday,” he'd told her, slipping her a hundred dollar bill, then he went back to bed.

The rest of her birthday was spent with her friends. They went to the usual hangouts—comic store, the mall, the forested area near the park where they smoked weed, drank vodka—purchased legally by CJ for the first time!—and listened to the music drifting from her phone. Once the sun set entirely, and a smattering of gifts had been presented, they left town and hit up a local free concert.

All in all, it wasn't the most exciting birthday, but it was pretty much everything she could've wanted without drawing too much fuss. She went to sleep that night, content.

The next morning, it all fell apart.

It started with an envelope. It was in her mailbox. No return address, just her name—her real name—scribbled in a familiar hand. Blood drained from her face, even as her heart kicked against her ribs. It was her mother's hand-writing. She recognized it from names and dates scribbled on the back of photographs. She knew it from the letters and grocery lists she had tucked away for safe-keeping shortly after her death.

Her eyes flicked back and forth quickly, surveying the lobby, but there was no one there, no clue as to who had slipped this in. Aaron maybe? Jamie? She had no way of really knowing. Briefly, CJ bit down on her lip before she lifted the wide, heavy envelope to her nose. She breathed in deeply.

It even smelled of her mother—faintly. Smelled of Mikayla and of something else, something else familiar that she couldn't quite place. That was maddening in itself, the fact she couldn't remember that scent. She had always prided herself on having such an impeccable memory recall. Not this time, at least not about that.

At least a dozen memories of her mother came flooding back—the time they went shopping, just before Christmas, when CJ was six. How she buried her face against her mom's coat, peeking out only to look at the lights in the store display. There was the time they were baking in the kitchen, the warm scent of cinnamon cookies and vanilla flooding her senses. And her mother, pale and gaunt, in her hospital bed, an IV protruding angrily from her arm when she held it out to her.

A frown pulled, for a second, and she hastily brought the envelope against her chest. Swallowing hard, she gave another quick glance around before locking her mailbox. She made hasted for the stairs

and climbed them, two at a time.

Once inside her apartment, she put the envelope on the kitchen table and leaned back against the sink, staring on it. The temptation to tear into it was strong and CJ fought to curb the impulse, wanting to think rationally about it for a moment.

She couldn't.

Her fingernails tore into the seam and reached in. Out came a handful of photographs. A lump formed in her chest. She'd pulled the pictures out face down, but she read the words on the back of them. A date. An age. Her name. Her mother's name.

And another name.

Her fingers fumbled, the other photographs landing on the table as she flipped it over to look at it.

And there she was. Mikayla Slater, smiling softly but tired, her brunette hair in a messy ponytail. Another hospital room. A pink blanket. A newborn baby—CJ—in the arms of a man seated on the edge of the bed. His attention was drawn away from the camera, but there was no mistaking who it was. Even if his name hadn't been written on the back, she would've known him. He had been a teacher, at one point, and a figure in the community. Someone respected, even feared. Someone she never, ever expected to see in conjunction with her mother.

The air seemed to leave the room, leaving everything a vacuum. She couldn't breathe. Her legs felt wobbly. There was a strange tightness in her chest. She wasn't aware that she'd pulled the chair out, until she was leaning forward in it, staring more intently at the photograph. The other photographs were much the same. The same hospital room, him holding her, her mom reclined on the bed.

It didn't immediately hit her, what it all meant. She found herself straightening the photographs into a pile. She pushed them away from her, stared. A minute passed as she worked it out in her head. When she stood, she immediately turned to the sink. The cold water ran, too tepid to really make much of an impact when she splashed it on her face, but it gave her something to do. A few extra minutes to process what she had just learned.

Mason Davis was her father.

For years, all her life, CJ had wondered about her father. There was very little Mikayla revealed about him. The fact he was a demon was obvious. It hurt CJ, when she was younger, to not know why no one would talk of him. As she grew older, she came to the conclusion that something terrible must've happened. A great tragedy. A dishonor or some sort of shame. Something that a young child could assure herself with, rather than face the fact that perhaps he was never spoken of because he didn't want her or her mother.

It seemed rational enough, but the mystery, the truth, was always elusive. CJ stopped asking after Mikayla died. It seemed like too much pain to bring up, and she sadly accepted the fact that she would never know her father. Despite the hollow it had put in her life, it was something she would have to get used to.

She shouldn't jump to conclusions. The photographs didn't necessarily mean he was her father. After all, not every person who held a newborn child was their parent. There were dozens of pictures of her uncles in much the same fashion. Still, it was a feeling, a gut impression.

Mason Davis was her father.

And further more, he had been right here the whole time. Never a part of her life, but so close by, so near. That old hurt rose up again. A heat flared inside her gut, burned in her eyes. No, those were the tears. CJ blinked them back, swallowed down her hurt.

She had to know. She had to know the truth. Picking up the photographs, she stuffed them back into the envelope and grabbed her keys. There was only one thing that she could do now to confirm it all. It might've been a bad idea, all impulse and anger, but CJ had made up her mind and there was no changing it now.

She had to go directly to Mason and ask him herself.

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He debated about the photographs. Oh, yes, he knew precisely what Kay's envelope held. He'd been there when she put the photographs into it. He'd held his daughter while she wrote the name on the front, sealed it.

There were tears in her eyes, but she didn't cry. They'd discussed this long before now. If they wanted Amber to have any semblance of a normal life, away from the harm that being Mason Davis's daughter would entail, they had to do this. It had been Kay's decision, ultimately. She was the one who'd brought it up. She'd lived with demigods all her life, and while the struggles with being different, supernatural couldn't be ignored, there was something in that lifestyle she didn't want for her child. She'd give her a chance.

When the time came, when Amber was old enough to understand, when she could fit into Mason's world a little more safely, then she could know.

"I would never let anything happen to her."

Kay had sighed, heavily, shoulders drooping with the effort. "I know, but I—I've explained this before. It's world that I just don't want her in. Not yet. And with you as a father—"

"—we cannot risk it. Yes. I know that as well." It was disparaging, but he respected Kay's choice, even though he'd argued, prior, that it was a world she was born into and there was no escaping that. Kay could try and if she changed her mind, Mason would be glad for the change. One thing about the Slater's, he discovered—they weren't so easily swayed once their minds were put to something. "Please bear in mind if you ever need anything at all, I will not hesitate. It will be my utmost priority."

The smile she had given him was sad. Her eyes dropped to the contentedly sleeping child in his arms. "I'll take her back, when you're ready."

But Mason wasn't ready; he didn't think he'd ever be ready. He had feared during Kay's pregnancy that the child would never be born, would never live, but she was here, and seemingly human in appearance—something of which Mason was grateful. Even if Amber had been born with ridges, or any other physical aspect of her demon heritage, a long-lasting glamour would've given her normalcy. But she looked perfectly human, perfectly perfect.

He smoothed hair back gently from her forehead, soft strands that already curled at the ends. She didn't stir at his touch, deeply asleep. "A few moments more," he murmured, unwilling yet to break the spell his young daughter had over him, full well knowing it was the last time he would spend with her before she could remember.

Mason had known it would be painful to give her up, to pass her back to her mother and walk out the door, but he hadn't fully fathomed what it would be like to be so nearby, watching her grow up, and having no hand in it.

He kept his distance, intending to put miles between Kay and Amber. For a time, he succeeded. Yet, circumstances continued to pull him in, keeping him just out of arms reach—close enough to watch, but never close enough to be a part of it.

It hurt almost more than he could bear. Mason had suffered his share of torture and pain and loss. This was nothing like the rest, in a category all its own. He bore it silently, and put his focus in on aiding Mara and Victor's children, his goddaughters. Andy and Vinnie flourished under his tutelage, and there were times when he wondered if Amber—CJ, as she was known now—exhibited any aptitude. He would perhaps never know.

When word reached him that Kay was ill, Mason immediately dropped everything and came to her side. She was in the last stages of whatever illness gripped her. She had waited too long for him and there was no magic that he could perform, no spells that would undo it. It was far too late for that, the illness far too progressive. It was puzzling, frustrating. He had all the power in the world, years and years of cultivated magics and understanding and there wasn't a damn thing he could do but watch her die.

"Aaron," she managed to say. Her voice was already weak, even then. "Aaron's going to look after her. We talked about it. We—" Kay's breath hitched "—we already decided."

"As you like." Mason wouldn't disagree with her, wouldn't argue with her, but oh, how that had stung. For all her debate on safety and keeping CJ free from the demonic and supernatural, she was handing her over to Aaron, a well-known degenerate, name already spoken of in the underground.

It felt personal then, as if some slight, some fault of Mason's that aided in her decision to remove him from his daughter's life. He tried to reason it, but ultimately accepted it as a dying woman's last wish. And when she died, he attended the funeral, standing in the far back, paying his respects at the grave site long after everyone else had departed.

It was just more pain to bear, to lock away.

In the years that followed, he continued to watch CJ from a distance. Now and again, he offered his assistance through Aaron, through Jamie. They were family, like it or not, and Mason felt honor-bound to help them as well.

A time came, as CJ entered her adolescence, that powers began to manifest. His aid was sought out. A tenuous agreement was met—he would reveal nothing of his true connection to the girl, but he would teach her, train her with her powers.

He never knew that too would be painful. Every moment spent with her, every impulse screaming at him to tell her the truth, wishing to be part of her life in more than just fleeting moments. It was too difficult to be in her presence, with this knowledge looming over him. He couldn't do it and resigned from his position as her teacher.

If he was meant to be in her life, it had to be all or nothing. A few years to him was nothing. In no time at all, she would be a young woman. She would reach the age and he could give her the envelope and, with hope, become part of her world as he always wanted.

Mason had delivered the letter himself, slipping it into her mailbox in the middle of the night, knowing she'd find it the next morning or afternoon. There was nothing to do now but wait.

He expected her to arrive at any time now, or rather, he hoped she would show up. After all, she would have questions and would seek out answers. The time had come for the secrets to fade away, for the truth to be revealed. Twenty-one long years, and the time had finally come. He should be ready, glad.

Then why, he asked himself, was dread heavy in his heart?

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She parked outside the front door of Odds and Ends Antiquities, ignoring the No Parking signs. Her anger hadn't simmered at all, but had instead grown in the few minutes it had taken her to drive over. A hundred thoughts had rushed through her head, no single one taking hold. CJ knew she had questions; she just didn't know which one to start with.

Perhaps she'd open with 'is it true?' Best to grab hold of the confirmation early, before she laid bare everything else.

The bell above the door tinkled merrily to signal her arrival, but to CJ it just sounded like jangling noise, too sharp and she resented that her arrival was announced in such a way.

There he was, standing behind the counter, looking at her, almost as if—

CJ stopped a few steps in. She suddenly felt deflated in his presence, like a balloon suddenly released, spinning around the room until there was nothing left at all.

"You sent the letter—the pictures." No question, that.

Mason had heard her motorcycle long before she arrived, had watched her storm to the door, all determination and anger. It certainly wasn't misplaced. He didn't show her how it affected him, keeping his face as impassive as possible—something in which he excelled.

"I did."

She had it, in her hand, the envelope with the torn seal. "So, it's true." Her voice was tight.

"Yes." No denial now. No secrets. Only the truth.

There was no air in here either. Her chest hurt. She couldn't breathe. Somehow, she managed to speak again. "All this time, it was you. You were—you were here all along. I thought my father—I don't know what I thought. Not that he was you. Not that he was just—here." Once the words came out, she found she couldn't stop them. Her fingers tightened on the envelope, crinkling it and the pictures within it. "All this time?"

Mason couldn't stand it. There were tears in her eyes, threatening to spill over, tears that came from anger and pain. The fact he was the cause of such a strong reaction was not lost on him. It had never been his intention to ever hurt her.

But pain was part of life, unavoidable. All he could offer now was some way to assuage it, with assurances, the truth, explanations. "Shortly after your birth, your mother put those photographs into the envelope. She gave it to me for safe-keeping, to give to you as proof, upon your twenty-first birthday." He spoke calmly, moving from behind the counter with slow steps. "It was her wish for you to remain safe, away from associations with myself and—"

"Safe? Safe from what? My mother dying? What? Demons? Vampires? The bad world?" No, she couldn't believe that. There was no thing as being safe, not in this world. Her uncles had taught her that much. "I know about you. I know you're powerful and—and I know—I know!—that's bullshit!"

Rational thought had long left her. It was pure emotion that fueled her now. She didn't know whether to lash out in anger, sadness, to cry or scream. Her breath came out quick. She could hear and feel her heart pounding in her ears.

No, no. The anger was expected, but the last thing Mason had thought was that she wouldn't immediately believe the truth, that she wouldn't understand their reasoning. And that was his mistake—a grave one. For a moment, he was without words, staring at his daughter. Her eyes, so like her mother's, blazed with ferocity.

He halted his approach. Perhaps if he came at this from a different angle. "Please allow me to

explain. I am certain you have more questions.”

Her sudden, bitter laugh came from nowhere, mildly startling him.

“Questions? That’s all I have. Questions. Secrets. What—what the hell?” She jabbed the envelope in his direction. “There’s nothing but questions. I just—I can’t deal with this right now. This isn’t happening.” There was no way she could really deny it, but she couldn’t be here right now. She’d been wrong to come here so unhinged, so emotional to the news. It was too late to take it back now, too late to think clearly.

“Just—fuck you, okay?” Her voice broke, and she turned her back on him before the tears started. She was out of the shop a second later, the crash of merchandise following the wake of her preternatural exit.

Mason wanted to break in, offer more assurances but that wouldn’t help. The girl was upset, understandably so and her emotions had broken through. The outburst left him once more speechless. There was nothing he could say, anyway, to an empty room.

His heart hurt with the familiar pain of rejection. His gaze stayed on the closed door. The OPEN sign flipped over to Closed. The blinds were drawn, door locked—all without moving a muscle. The mess of CJ’s departure, however, was left on the floor. He hadn’t the desire to tidy the mess yet. He had no desire to do anything.

Twenty-one years of absence, of secrets, of lies, deceptions. She wouldn’t have perceived him favorably at all. And Mason had been a fool to think otherwise. It was a bittersweet sort of encounter. There was relief to it—no more secrets, everything was in the open, but the pain was raw and bleeding.

Hope had done little for him as of late, but he couldn’t help but allow a sliver of it to show through the despair, for his daughter. He wouldn’t ask for forgiveness, he wouldn’t ask for acceptance, but he would hope for her to heal and move forward.

It was what Kay would’ve wanted. What he wanted was inconsequential and always had been.

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Tears blurred her vision, making it difficult to maneuver the bike safely through traffic. She pulled off into the empty parking lot of a closed Big Lots and cut the engine. If anyone passed by and saw the lone girl on her motorcycle, crying her eyes out—well, they could fuck themselves too. CJ didn’t care any more.

Everything she had ever believed could be a lie. What other secrets had been kept from her? Anger burned. She was angry at Mason, at Aaron, at Jamie, even mad at her mother for all the good that would do. Most of all, she was mad at herself—and she didn’t even know why.

There was a hollow again, an even bigger one than before. The knowledge of her father, the knowledge she thought might fill that gap had only eroded it further. It hurt and she hated it.

Swallowing hard to remove the lump in her throat, CJ gunned the engine of her bike loudly, tearing out of the parking lot, leaving behind tire marks and smoke. She had no idea where she was going, but she only knew she had to get as far away as she could.

As if any of it made a difference at all.