

**These Still Black Waters**  
**By Christina McDonald**

**Ash Deleted Chapter (end)**

Sometimes I still see her.

My mom.

In that in-between time, between night and morning. Or just a flickering glance when I pass the mirror in my room. I see her in the shadows between the moonlit clouds and in the space between my dreams.

And I get that *feeling*.

A tingling that kinda sweeps up my arms. A pressure in my ears. It's like she's still there, waiting just around the corner somewhere. But when I turn around she isn't there. It's just me, in my own head, with a feeling. Only a feeling.

I wish I could tell her why I was so mad at her. The truth is, I saw her at the motel.

I was with my driving ed instructor practicing backing around a corner when I saw a man pull into the hotel's parking lot across the street. He looked familiar; that's the only reason I took a second look. It was Stephen, the owner of the veterinarian clinic where Mom worked. I'd met him and his wife at a family barbecue the summer before. I was confused because he was with a woman, and the woman wasn't his wife. They got out of the car and that's when I realized the woman who wasn't his wife was my mom.

I may only be fifteen, but I'm not an idiot. I know when you see a man and a woman together in a motel parking lot that nothing good will come of it.

I sat there in the car for what felt like ages just frozen. I watched Mom and Stephen walk across the parking lot, Stephen's arm draped over Mom's shoulders. She looked irritated, her lips pursed the way they did when she wanted to be left alone.

Somebody was strolling across the parking lot behind them. A big, boxy woman with thin brown hair. She was wearing pink scrubs under a limp, old-fashioned cardigan. Her gaze was so focused on them I thought maybe she was trying to get their attention, but then they disappeared inside, and the woman continued on into a corridor that disappeared from view.

I told my instructor I needed to pee; it was an emergency. He turned all red the way old guys do when girls talk about things they think should be private. I ran across the street to the hotel, up the stairs, staying a ways behind my mom and Stephen. They disappeared into a room at the end of the corridor.

They didn't even shut their blinds all the way. I snapped a few pictures with my phone. My hands were sweating, shaking so bad they kept slipping and I almost couldn't steady the phone. I felt like I would puke, and then my mom's face swung towards the window, and for a second I thought she'd seen me.

I ducked down and moved away from the window, then ran back down the stairs, across the street.

I planned to tell her that I knew, but I couldn't. Instead, I left the pictures in an envelope on my dad's windshield. I wanted him to deal with it. But he didn't. Instead, he went away for work, like it was some totally normal occurrence.

That's why I stayed home that night, the night Ellen Baker broke into our house and killed my mom. I figured if I was around, Mom wouldn't go off with Stephen again. She'd stay with me and maybe she would forget about what she was doing.

I roll onto my back and stare up at my ceiling. My fingers find the notch of thickened scar tissue at my temple, where the bullet passed through my skull. I stroke the skin, gently at first, and then harder, so hard my eyes fill with tears.

I wish I hadn't given my dad those pictures. I was pissed and probably reacted in a stupid way. I guess I thought it was unfair that Dad didn't know, but I was too scared to be the one to tell him. Maybe I should've confronted her instead. Would it have helped? Who knows?

There are days I miss her. Like, violently miss her. Maybe she cheated on my dad, she pushed that girl's car over a cliff, but she was still my mom. And she was a *good* mom. She loved me. I know that.

I think maybe everyone has bits of dark in them, but bits of light as well; like a weird and terrible mix of good and bad. I know I do. My mom totally did. I guess maybe it's more important to focus on Mom's better qualities while also learning from her mistakes. It's the only way people can change for the better.

She came through for me. She saved my life. Isn't that a kind of redemption?

Maybe anyone can choose to redeem themselves. But doubling down on cruelty will only bring about more bad. Look at Ellen. She'll be in prison for the rest of her life for what she did.

I wish I could talk to my mom. Sometimes I feel so scared and worried and confused by things I think I'll just never understand.

Like, where was I all that time when I was in a coma? Was I in my body there in the hospital, or was I really swimming in Black Lake, sleeping in that turret room and watching TV with my mom? Can that be possible?

It all felt a little like a dream, or maybe dream isn't the right word. I saw it, I was there, but it was like how you might see an image that's been double exposed. Like in this photography class I took once, when I forgot to wind the film good enough between shots and got a second image superimposed over the first.

It was like that. Two things happening at once.

Dad says maybe it did really happen. Maybe I'd needed to be there with Mom those last days, in the in-between, and once we'd figured out what we'd needed to figure out, then that circuit in my brain had shut down and I'd come back to my body.

I hear my dad calling my name now and I sit up and stretch. It's still early—too early for a weekend—but I smell pancakes and bacon, my favorite, and I'm hungry so I get up. I pull on a robe and shove my feet into slippers and my hand is just twisting the door handle when I feel it. That whisper of cool air, a shift in the room's pressure.

I smile and close my eyes. "Hi, Mom."

She's still here. Around me. Inside me. Where she'll always be.