

These Still Black Waters
By Christina McDonald

Jess's alternate ending

It's dark when I park in front of the farmhouse, a cat's claw moon glowing in the night sky. It's a beautifully updated colonial farmhouse, blue with white trim and white shutters and a wraparound front porch with a hammock hanging on one side. It's obvious someone has done a lot of work to the place.

I cut the engine and get off my bike. A light gleams inside, casting a warm, welcoming glow out toward the driveway. I stare at the soft circle of light, feeling like maybe it's illuminating a path forward. All I need to do is take the next step.

I can see Mac inside. He's standing on a ladder, a paintbrush in hand, his bare arms muscled and tan. A tool belt is draped around his waist. He's grown a beard, a single splotch of white paint has dried along his stubbled jaw.

The urge to brush it away, to feel the warmth of my husband's skin, surprises me, even now.

I don't want to merely exist anymore. I realize now that I've been trying so hard to escape the past I've forgotten to live. And I don't want that to be my future. I don't want to hide under the numbing blanket of booze or work. I want to truly live.

There is, I've learned, something to be said for choosing happiness. Maybe all it takes is changing the filter from which I've been viewing my life to find it could all bring me more joy than I realized.

That was what this last case had taught me. What Neve taught me. And, yes, I'm aware of how ironic it is that I've learned to embrace life from a woman who is dead.

I gaze up at the lines of the farmhouse in front of me. For the first time in a long time that restlessness inside me has quietened. I'm calm. At peace.

I climb the front steps and ring the doorbell. I didn't tell him I was coming. Didn't even call him after the case wrapped up. I wait as footsteps sound from the other side. The door swings open.

Mac holds a dry paintbrush in one hand, his bare arms muscled and tan. A tool belt is draped around his waist. He's dressed in a white t-shirt stained with flecks of paint. His jeans hang low on a waist now slimmer than it had been before. His blond hair is shorter than before. He's grown a beard and a single splotch of white paint has dried along his stubbled jaw. The urge to brush it away, to feel the warmth of his skin, surprises me, even now.

Mac's eyes roam my face, lighting with a happiness I haven't seen in longer than I care to admit. He smiles and opens his arms.

"You're home."

I nod, my throat thick with tears. "I'm home."

And I step into my husband's arms.