

Memory of Water

The Orcadian Novels
Book Two

Stuart Wakefield

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Bill, who still makes circles in the waters
of my memory.

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reminding me I should be writing.

CHAPTER ONE

RIVER

I was waist-deep in the River Thames before I saw the creature; moonlight glinting from a shell as black as the water on which it floated.

Earlier in the day, I had woken to bright, crisp weather and wandered out into the streets of London with neither purpose nor destination, save for the smallest hope that the winter sunlight on my skin might lift my mood. When the cold numbed my fingers, I buried my hands deep into my coat pockets, only for one to close around the vodka bottle I had finished between getting up and going out. The sunlight brightened everyone's spirits but mine and I found myself longing for the usual winter drizzle that turned the capital into the cemetery in which I felt most at home; its rain-stained buildings jutting into the sky like so many gravestones.

Finding myself in Piccadilly, jostled by commuters and tourists alike, I debated where to go. Perhaps I'd visit the places that meant something to me, but the only one I could think of was my old school and, if I went there, I'd only be reminded of Leven; the boy I'd loved and lost. I wouldn't visit my parents. I had no desire to see my father, who I knew despised me, and my mother would be less than pleased at my arrival, knowing the foul mood it would plunge my father

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into. He made no secret of the fact I was a constant source of disappointment to him and, the night he found me in bed with Leven, my father told me I disgusted him. My mother hadn't said a word about the incident and I knew it was because she didn't care enough for it to upset her. If I turned up at my parents' house only my sister Beth would be all smiles and hugs, and I wasn't sure if I could cope with any of their reactions, knowing what I planned to do in time.

I turned back toward my flat just behind the South Bank on Cornwall Road, weaving my way through the excited crowds in Leicester Square and Covent Garden. I stopped on Waterloo Bridge and looked up the river towards St Paul's. The river ran away from me, slow and silent, its surface mottled by a drizzle I fancied had been conjured purely by my mood.

A bus' engine blasted warm air onto my back, and my stomach churned when it combined with the nauseous wake of a passing teenage boy devouring fast food from a disintegrating cardboard box. A wad of grease and sauce splattered on the pavement as the upper and lower halves of his burger sheared across each other. He swore loudly before laughing and carrying on his way with his friends. I watched them go, unable to remember a time I'd smiled since being with Leven.

Crossing the remainder of the bridge, I walked down the steps and onto the South Bank, my head down, and my collar pulled up against the evening breeze. I watched the river, lingering for longer than usual, and listened to the people spill out of the National Theatre behind me, discussing the shows they'd seen and making plans for Christmas.

When the crowds dispersed, and I finally stood alone in the night, I came to the conclusion I simply didn't belong in the world. I didn't fit right; just one of those types of people born wrong. I didn't even know whether I was a good person or not.

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I thought of Martha in *David Copperfield*, and how she identified with the scum the river carried from the city to the sea. I leaned forward, wanting to go with it, and recited Martha's words. "It's the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that's fit for me."

With her words fixed in my mind, I crossed to the closest set of steps leading down to the river and climbed over the low, locked gate. As I waded into the water I gasped involuntarily. I didn't know how long it would take before I lost the ability to function; five minutes, maybe sooner depending on how much alcohol remained in my system.

Now, faced with a creature that had already drowned as I intended, I hesitated. To my discomfort, I realised I stood downstream from it. The lifeless thing floated directly toward me. When it was close enough for me to make out its true shape, I saw it was human, most likely a man in a fancy dress costume; perhaps a reveller who had fallen over the side of a party boat. I doubted he'd been dead for long.

When he reached me I placed my hands on his shoulders and held him at arm's length. The smooth, black surface I'd mistaken for a shell was a set of hard, interlocked panels, like a suit of armour and I was surprised he floated at all. The current caught him and he drifted around me. Reaching out to catch him, my left arm hooked around his waist, and I trembled with cold and fear in equal measure. With him anchored at my side, I considered what to do. His friends and family would be looking for him. If I took him back to shore they'd have answers, a body to bury, and time to mourn. If I let him float away he might be lost forever but what if he, like me, had wanted to die and never be found? I had no right to decide for him.

Hoping sight of his face might provide some sense of what to do, I decided to turn him over but I didn't know what to expect; I had never seen a dead body before. Would milky eyes stare up at me like pearls set into the mount of a stricken expression, reflecting his final struggle for breath?

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The manoeuvre was difficult due to his weight—again puzzling me as to how he was able to float—and the current threatened to pull him away from me, his smooth armour slipping beneath my fingers. The helmet's faceplate frightened me more than the thought of lifeless eyes. Even in the relative darkness of the city night its aggressive lines and proportions suggested threat. The absurd hope he'd at least won the best costume award countered the dread urging me to let him go. His open eyes gazed up through the sockets but they were the only indication a human lay beneath.

Securing him a second time, I splayed my right hand over the faceplate and felt for a groove in which to dig my fingers and pull it free but, having now lost almost all sense of feeling, I found nothing. I tugged at the helmet's crest but it hugged his head too tight to be coaxed free. Frustrated, I looked back at the shallow beach under Gabriel's Wharf. I'd have to take him back in and find something else with which to prise off the faceplate.

I felt a movement, a shift of weight and volume, and looked down to see a naked man, wet hair plastered over his face, floating at my side, his eyes now closed but lips parted as if in silent song. Crying out with surprise, I almost let him go. The armour was gone. I looked behind me but saw nothing floating away. Perhaps I'd triggered some mechanism to release the armour and it had sunk. I tapped my right foot on the riverbed to find it but felt nothing.

Cocking my head, I touched his face, first wiping the hair from his features before placing my hand on his left cheek and running my thumb along his prominent cheekbone.

He looked peaceful.

Familiar.

"Lev?" No, it couldn't be. Leven had fled London for the Orkney Islands in the summer and wasn't returning—Beth had told me that much—but this man looked just like him. I closed my eyes, rubbed the back of my arm across my face to clear my vision, and looked again.

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It was him. For years I'd watched his face at school, studied his features as they betrayed every emotion he had. I'd held his face in my hands, kissed him, and seen the ecstasy of my love for him echoed back at me.

Sudden, unexpected grief scooped him up into my arms and crushed him against my chest like a recovered treasure. His death filed away what little of my insides remained. Time slowed. The river slowed. I felt more compelled than ever to end my own life. At least I would go with him. Here. Now.

Whispering into his hair, I cradled his head into my shoulder. "Goodbye, sweetheart,"

I felt it then, as I held him, catching the back of his head with a numb hand, and turning his mouth to my ear.

There was breath in his body.

The bitter cold forgotten, I roared hoarse laughter into the night. In what I thought to be my final moment he had been delivered to me. Leven lived.

Impatient for the dry land I'd so recently discarded, I strode across the current with purpose, my breath laboured but my muscles strong, powered by the adrenaline pumping hard within me. Alternating waves of elation and panic coursed through me. He was alive but what had happened to him?

Stones crunched deep and heavy in the night when I staggered onto the beach. Wiping my face, I realised it was wet not only because of the strands of his hair that clung to my face as I held him, but also because of my tears.

Struggling to maintain balance on feet I could no longer feel, I stomped the beach with my boot, flattening out a section on which to lay my precious flotsam.

I tugged off my coat and laid it next to him before lifting him onto one half and folding over the other. Satisfied he was both protected and hidden, I hobbled back up the steps to scan the pavement and check we were alone.

Empty.

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We were alone for the time being so I limped back down and sat next to him, my knees hugged to my chest, and debated what to do.

I knew the right thing to do would be to call for an ambulance and get him to a hospital but, apart from an angry-looking welt in the centre of his chest, he looked free from injury. If he went into hospital I ran the risk of not seeing him again. Alex, his foster father, would be notified and I'd be at his mercy, with no visitation rights, because I wasn't a relative.

Unsettled by the uncertainty of what might happen, I played out mental scenarios of doom and failure over and over again. Starting to feel lost in a future I couldn't allow, I pulled myself back into the present.

I could nurse him myself. If he was hypothermic I'd find out how to warm him up properly. Then, when he recovered, we could talk. I would explain that abandoning him, as instructed to do so by my father, was my only regret in life. Leven could leave if he wanted to but perhaps we could start again. This time I would love him the way he needed me to; the way I should have done before. I would never leave him again and never let him be taken from me.

I made my decision.

The most direct route back to my flat was to cut through Gabriel's Wharf onto Upper Ground and then turn right toward Cornwall Road. I pulled the hood of my sopping sweatshirt over my face and covered Leven's too, in case the closed-circuit television cameras picked us up. It took my remaining strength to lift him and heave him over my shoulder.

I'd only taken one unsteady step before a voice froze me to the spot.

"Shaun. What are you doing?"

CHAPTER TWO

BETH

A young woman hurried toward me from beneath the wharf's timber pilings. The hood of her fitted black coat may have covered her face but, in the pale gold light cast from the lamps and illuminated trees up on the pavement, I recognised my sister Beth's striking red hair tumbling out over her chest.

"Shaun?" she said. "I heard the most horrid cry. Was that you?" She pulled back her hood and motioned to the bundle slung over my shoulder. "What are you doing?"

I took a deep breath and tried to think of something to say. "It's all good, sis. Heavy night, you know?" I attempted to make the gesture of drinking from an invisible glass but lost my balance and only just kept my hold on Leven.

She darted forward. "Put that down. You're in no condition to be carrying anything. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Nice night for a swim," I said.

She didn't laugh. "Pretty brave for this weather." Wind flared around us and she looked up at the sky from under a cocked eyebrow. I had no idea what she'd been doing out here but I knew, if I asked, I'd have to explain myself.

I followed her gaze and saw dense clouds roll in over the waning moon. "It's fine once you're in," I said.

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Her laugh was short, but genuine. “Tell that to your blue lips.”

Unable to stand the cold, or Leven’s weight, any longer, my legs buckled and I fell to my knees. Beth caught his shoulders as he tumbled out of my grasp; preventing his head from smashing into the stony beach. It was then that she saw his face and her reaction was as strong as mine. She didn’t have the strength to gather him up but hunched over him instead as if to protect him from me as much as the elements.

I tugged uselessly at her, trying to get her attention. “I need your help to get him back to the flat.”

“What have you done?” Her ferociousness was swift and startling and, when she advanced on me, I fell back onto my hands and feet, gouging troughs in the sand and stones as I scrambled away from her.

“I didn’t do anything. I found him like that, out there.” I didn’t tell her about the black shell in which he’d been encased because I was no longer sure whether it had been a costume or not. Costumes didn’t just dissolve and disappear.

Beth stood over me, and I avoided her gaze but something behind her, underneath the wharf, caught my eye. Squinting to focus on it, I saw two candles flickering at the river’s edge.

“What were you doing?” I asked.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, as if deciding whether or not to bolt. “I was just hanging out.”

I gritted my teeth but they rattled anyway. I gestured to the candles. “What’s all that, then?”

Perhaps it was because the cold gnawed through my flesh and into my bones that the look she gave the assembled items seemed to go on forever. When she finally met my gaze she looked unsure and, finally, like a girl of her seventeen years.

“I was making a promise to someone,” she said, and I understood from her tone I shouldn’t ask exactly who that

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“someone” was. It was all the explanation she was going to offer but I suspected she gave more than just a promise to the mysterious recipient. She held out a hand to help me up, but I shook my head.

She looked surprised at my refusal. “You’re still trying to do this alone, aren’t you?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“You know what. Get better.”

“I’m fine,” I said, and held up a hand to divert the conversation’s course.

Beth ignored it and pressed on. “You’re not.”

“If you want to help me then help me get Leven back to the flat.”

Her right boot twisted in the sand while she considered my request. “He should be in hospital.”

“He should be with me,” I said, unwavering in my feeling. Leven belonged with me. I’d obeyed my father’s wishes and stayed away from him but denying my instinctive drive to be with him had thrown me into depression, thoughts of suicide, a breakdown, and a spell of observation in a mental health unit.

“He should be in Orkney,” Beth said. “What’s he doing here?” She crossed back to him, but didn’t crouch down again. While she thought, she rubbed a finger under her lower lip.

“We’ll never know if he goes into hospital,” I said, desperate to bring her round to my way of thinking. “We won’t have visitation rights. We’re not family.”

“I’m sure Alex would let us see him.”

“Perhaps he’d let you,” I said. “I very much doubt I’m in favour.”

“Lev won’t be happy to see you.”

I took a step toward her and raised my hands, palms up, in a begging gesture. “You know I didn’t have any choice.”

“It’s not that. . .”

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The way she trailed off made me anxious because trailing off wasn't something she often did. She was rarely lost for words. Trailing off meant bad news and biting her lower lip—which she now chewed—meant very bad news.

“I told him you got married.”

It took me a moment to process what she'd said.

“You—did what?”

“He needed closure,” she said. “Short of telling him you were dead, I thought being married would do the trick.”

“And?” If my exterior was numb, my insides weren't, and my stomach twisted around itself.

“It did.”

“So he hates me?”

Her voice rose in both volume and pitch. “He was angry. He felt betrayed.”

Unsure whether it was shock or my antidepressants that kept me calm, I didn't raise my voice. “That makes two of us,” I said. I watched the muscles in her jaw tighten but she said nothing. “This is the part where you apologise, Beth.”

Jaw still clenched, she thrust her chin up toward me. “You abandoned him.”

“I had to, for his own good. You know the trouble Dad threatened and you know what it did to me.”

“And I don't want you to get ill again,” she said. “This is a bad idea, Shaun.”

“It's not the worst idea I've had today,” I said. “Trust me.”

One half-hearted protest later, Beth gave in, took Leven by the ankles, and we set off.

I found Gabriel's Wharf creepy enough at night but now, as we passed the black expanse of each shop window, I wondered if anyone really did watch us from the other side. The weight of that thought eclipsed that of either Leven or my sodden clothes. The most strenuous thing I'd ever seen Beth do was totter down the street laden down with designer bags and, sure enough, she struggled to keep Leven's feet off

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the ground. I was thankful that years of rugby training had left me strong enough to bear most of his weight despite feeling exhausted.

When we stepped through the gate and onto Upper Ground, I looked right toward the junction with Cornwall Road and the block of flats in which I lived. Seeing it so close, relief washed over me.

We reached the entrance and climbed the stairs to the first floor where I struggled to open the door without putting him down. Once I finally managed it, I backed carefully into the flat to keep from knocking any part of him against the peeling wooden frame.

Inside, I discarded the coat, took him from Beth, and carried him to the bedroom before laying him down. When I went back into the lounge to retrieve the ancient electric heater, I found Beth installed on the sofa, surveying the room with open disgust.

“I know you’re not permitted to work and still claim housing benefit,” she said. “But I don’t believe the definition of ‘work’ extends to housework.”

She ran a fingertip across the coffee table and held it up to show me the thick dust it collected.

“What?” I said. “It’s preserving powder.”

“You’d be happier if you did your housework.”

“I doubt it,” I said, but I secretly agreed with her. In the three months I’d lived here since moving out, I hadn’t so much let the place go as positively cut it adrift.

She looked up at the ceiling where a large damp patch had turned mouldy. “You need to do something about that or you’ll get a chest infection which is the last thing you need.”

I didn’t look up. I’d stared at the stain all week since I’d been discharged from the unit. “The landlord checked it out and he said there’s no leak in the flat above.”

“Apart from the obvious influence that stain has on your mood every time you look at it, you do realise that water represents your emotions? I mean, seeing dirty water in a dream indicates you’re wallowing in your negative emotions,

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and to dream water is rising up in your house means you're becoming overwhelmed by your emotions."

"Thank you, Doctor Meadows," I said. "I guess it's fair to say I've been living in my nightmare."

I padded back into the bedroom and set up the heater in the corner. Only then did I luxuriate in the pleasure of simply watching Leven while he slept, with only the rise and fall of his chest suggesting he lived at all.

His skin glowed, caught between the white-blue moonlight streaming in through the bedroom window to my left, and the pale, orange glow from the heater's three bars. I left the bedside lamp off. His breathing remained regular, albeit shallow, but his skin was still cold to the touch so I cocooned him in blankets retrieved from the spare room. Satisfied I'd done all I could, I perched on the edge of the bed and stroked the damp curls away from his brow. He looked as beautiful as I remembered him.

I ran a hand through my hair, self-conscious of its ragged cut thanks to the blunt kitchen scissors I'd used, and wondered what to do next.

Needing to get out of my wet clothes, but not wanting to leave him, I undressed at the foot of the bed and retrieved a couple of warm towels from the radiator, slinging one around my waist and the other around my shoulders. I fought the temptation to crawl into bed with him, in case he woke up and panicked, but I wanted to hold him against me, to feel reassured he was indeed real. Perhaps, if he woke in my arms, he'd remember what we had, however brief, and forgive me for abandoning him.

My eyes felt dry and I rubbed them, trying to resist the dreadful thought he might be gone when I opened them, and I'd imagined the whole thing. Reluctantly, I looked again; he remained. I checked my pulse which felt faster than normal, and then concentrated on my breathing. Once the anxiety passed, I went to talk to Beth, who flicked through an old newspaper much too quickly to be taking anything in.

I sat down next to her. "What's going on?"

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“Apparently, you’re off to a toga party.”

“Don’t be glib.”

She came to the end of the paper but didn’t look up. “I could ask you what’s going on.” After an uncomfortable, sideways glance at me, she started turning the pages in reverse.

Deciding on a different approach, I made small talk. “So, what’s new? Are you seeing anyone?”

She stopped turning the pages. “A pilot. Half French on his mother’s side. Very pretty—very—but thick. I’m being funny, right, but it rather takes the joy out of it when you have to explain how brilliant you’re being.”

This was the Beth I knew. During that one description she’d thrown down the paper and turned to me, her eyes glittering with indignation.

“A pilot?” I said. “How old is he?”

She rolled her eyes, pulled her hood up, and slumped back into the pitifully thin cushions. “You’re not going to get all judgemental, are you?”

“How old is he?” I asked.

“He’s not old old,” she said. “It’s not like he’s thirty or anything.”

“How old is he, Beth?”

She paused, bit her lip, and spoke out of the corner of her mouth. “He’s twenty-three.”

“You’re seventeen,” I said.

She made a sound of disgust. “I’ve only snogged Marcel. Besides, Daddy caught you shagging Leven when you were only sixteen.”

“And look how that turned out.” Another pause followed, during which neither of us knew what to say. When Beth reached for the paper I broke the silence. “So what’s going on?”

She covered her face with her hands and groaned. “It’s late and I’m tired so can you be more specific?”

I wanted to ask her about Leven’s change but I wasn’t certain if what I’d seen—the shell, costume, or whatever the

hell it was—had been real. “What were you doing on the beach?” I asked.

She lowered her hands and sat forward. “When I last saw Lev, I discovered I might have a special—skill.”

“Judging by the look on your face,” I said. “I’m guessing it’s not suitable for *Britain’s Got Talent?*”

“I have premonitions,” she said.

I stood up. “All right, if you’re only going to take the proverbial then I’m going to go and check on Lev.”

Beth caught my hand and pulled herself up to block my path to the bedroom. “I took him some of my papier-mâché models when I visited him in Orkney and every single one was a place in which something significant, something I never could have known about, had happened. He took me to those places, places I’d never seen, and I’d got them exactly right.”

Absurd as it sounded, the look on her face telegraphed her absolute belief that she had the power to do something I couldn’t grasp. “I’m not sure that counts as a premonition,” I said.

“I know, I know, but if I can see the places now, then maybe I can get better and see what happens *in* those places.”

“I still don’t understand what you were doing on the beach.”

“There’s a woman in Orkney called Maggs, who runs the local pub, and she said I should perform a ritual after which my powers would increase.”

Whoever this Maggs woman was, I didn’t like the sound of her. Landladies shouldn’t be mixing alcohol with stories about magic. “And who is this woman, exactly?” I asked.

“She’s Lev’s protector, sort of.”

“Like a guardian? Is that why he stayed out there?”

“No,” said Beth. “He went to see his father but he met her there.”

“He found his real father?”

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“Yes, but he died while he was out there.” I started to speak but Beth gestured for me to stay quiet. “Lev is special, Shaun, more so than you can imagine, and it’s better you hear it from him. I’m going to go home now and get some sleep. I suggest you do the same. Call me if you have any problems, okay?”

“My landline got cut off,” I said. “My mobile, too.”

She gave me her phone, kissed me on the cheek, and left.

I dragged the single armchair from the lounge into the bedroom and placed it facing Leven. I was determined to be the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes. If all this talk about Beth’s models was true then maybe magic was true, too, and the thought crossed my mind that if I’d ever needed a love potion—one of the ones where you fell in love with the first person you saw—now was the perfect time.

I wasn’t sure how long I slept—it was still dark when I woke—but my hair had dried in the warmth from the heater.

Rubbing my eyes again, grinding the grains of sleep away from the corners, I ran the back of my hand over chapped lips and smothered a yawn. Leven continued to sleep. I stroked his brow with caution, trying not to wake him unnecessarily, but keen to reassure myself I hadn’t conjured him in a dream. He felt warm again. I bathed in the relief until hunger and thirst clouded my mood. I settled for a cup of sweet tea over solid food, reasoning that if I drank enough of it I’d eventually rehydrate. Besides, a hot drink always gave me some comfort when alcohol wasn’t an option.

In the kitchen, the sticky linoleum felt glacial beneath my bare feet. I recoiled from the fridge as the door swung open. Something inside reeked. Turning my head away, I felt around for the milk, pulling it out and shutting the door again as quietly, but as fast, as I could. The kettle gurgled reluctantly to life and, after what felt like an endless wait, finally shuddered to a steaming halt, like an overweight jogger. It was so arctic in the kitchen my hands shook as I poured the

scalding water onto a used tea bag lurking at the bottom of a stained, chipped mug. What I really wanted was a vodka but I had someone else to consider now. The thought struck me as odd. It felt like a long time since I'd had anyone to consider but myself. If Leven stayed here I'd have to look after him, and the only way I could do that was by looking after me. I didn't only have to make amends; I had to be the best I could be from now on.

The sky became lighter during my reverie—the grey morning light only London possesses—and I stirred milk and three sugars into the tea. The smell from the fridge still lingered in the dingy space. As I sipped from the mug, feeling the rough edge of the chip on my lips and tongue, I looked at the kitchen with a new perspective. I lived in filth. Ancient fat clung to the tiles behind a cooker so old its enamelled white top was freckled with a primordial ooze of oil and debris. A film of dirt covered everything and the bin overflowed with cheap takeaway boxes and even cheaper lager cans.

Steeling myself, I set down the mug and opened the fridge door. “Right then,” I muttered. “Let's sort you out.”

After a minute I retreated to find a tea towel before tying it over my lower face to cover my nose and mouth. I picked my way across the sticky vinyl flooring, making a mental note to buy floor cleaner, and wrestled with the window catch to let in some cool, fresh air. The window was filthy and not just the glass. I pulled a flimsy knife out of the sink and attacked the thick band of black mould that lined the bottom of the frame. How had I never noticed it before? My face started to feel hot and I pulled the towel down around my neck. The smell from the fridge reminded me of the job I'd abandoned and I turned back to it. In the ten feet between me and the source of the smell I counted a dozen other jobs requiring my attention. From this angle it was like seeing the kitchen for the first time. All the things I'd ignored for so long needed tackling before Leven woke up. I couldn't let him see me living like this.

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I thought about having a drink, telling myself it would take the edge off my nerves and help me think straight.

My hands shook as I fumbled in the back of a cabinet for a bottle of vodka I half-remembered squirrelling away. I let out a long, satisfied sigh when my hands closed around the smooth glass. Just touching it relaxed me. It would feel so good to take a gulp. I unscrewed the top feverishly and breathed in the familiar smell of evaporating alcohol but a dry cough from the other room jolted me out of my stupor. Distracted, I put the bottle down and hurried into the bedroom.