

Rooms Without Names

Paulius Kajokas

A Novel

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*You don't wake up by escaping the dream.
You wake up by becoming conscious inside it.*

Chapter 1: The Last Fight

Steve McKerry came in through the side entrance like he always did when he was late, when the night had already made its decision about how honest it was going to be. The garage door whispered shut behind him, and the house accepted him with that expensive, rehearsed silence that came from too much square footage and too many rooms nobody sat in unless guests were watching. Outside, October pressed wet leaves against the driveway, maple and oak stuck to the stone like bright, failing stamps, and the wind worried the bare branches as if it wanted a confession out of them.

He'd left a hotel ballroom in the city less than an hour ago, all chandeliers and handshakes, all the neat, valuable language of contracts and timelines and national security, and he'd taken enough drinks to feel warm without letting them steal the part of his mind that kept a ledger of everything. That was the lie he liked best about himself, that he could poison the edges of his night and still cut clean lines through it, that nothing in him ever truly blurred.

His jacket was slung over one shoulder, his tie loosened like a concession, and his steps were steady, because he'd decided they were. The kitchen lights were on.

Brigit stood at the island with her arms folded, not in pajamas and not in a dress, but in that in-between uniform she wore when sleep was possible but trust wasn't, hair pulled back, face washed, a single glass of water untouched at her elbow like she'd been waiting long enough to get thirsty and then refused to reward the moment. Behind her, the windows were black mirrors and the backyard was a damp, unseen sprawl of trees and trimmed hedges, the kind of landscaping that tried to look like it had always belonged there.

"You're home." Her voice was calm in a way that didn't mean calm, it meant control, it meant she'd already spent the anger and was saving the rest for something sharper.

Steve set his keys down too carefully, as if care would count as respect. "I said I'd be late."

"It's one-thirty, Steve." She didn't glance at the clock, because she didn't need to. "You didn't text. You didn't call. You just... appear, like the house is a stage and you're the only one who gets to decide when the scene starts."

He let out a breath that was almost a laugh, but it didn't make it all the way. He could still taste bourbon and smoke and the sweet bite of whatever someone had insisted on pouring for him at the end, to celebrate, to seal the night like wax on a letter. "It was a company event, Brigit. People flew in. D.C. people. The kind that expect you to stay until they're done talking."

"And you expect me to keep pretending that's romantic." Her eyes tracked him the way you tracked a drunk man on ice, ready for the slip. "It's always something. A deadline, a launch, a client, an emergency. Or a party. Or both."

He pulled his phone out, more reflex than intention, thumb flicking the screen as if proof lived there. No messages. No missed calls. The house had good reception. Their marriage had learned to do without it. "I'm not out there because I want to avoid you."

Brigit's mouth tightened, a small movement that made him irrationally angry because it looked like she'd filed him away in a category she could label. "Then why does it feel like I'm married to someone's absence, and your body just drops by when it runs out of excuses?"

He shrugged off his jacket and draped it over a chair that no one used, the gesture as automatic as breathing. "Because you're tired. Because you're stuck on this story where I'm the problem and you're the abandoned heroine."

Her eyes flashed, not loud but sudden. "Don't do that. Don't make this about a story. I'm not asking for poetry, Steve, I'm asking for a husband who comes home before the house goes to sleep."

The word husband hit him like a hand on a bruise. He could feel the alcohol in his blood trying to soften the impact, like padding, and he hated it for that. "Our kids aren't even here," he said, and immediately heard how wrong it sounded, how transactional. "They're at my parents'. They're fine."

"That's your argument?" Brigit stepped closer, and the tiles under her bare feet made no sound. "That the boys are gone so you can keep pretending we don't exist unless there's a photo opportunity?"

He didn't say Matthew's name, though it came to him first, seventeen and restless and already half out the door, already looking at campuses and futures like his home was something he'd outgrown. He didn't say John's name either, almost fourteen and still the kind of kid who could be quiet for

hours and then say something that landed like a stone in your chest. He didn't say them because saying them meant he'd have to admit they were the only reason he still understood the word family as anything other than an obligation.

"You're twisting it," Steve said, careful, measured, as if the right tone could force the night back into a manageable shape. "I'm building something. I'm running a company that employs people, that keeps this roof over our heads, that—"

"That builds tools for war," Brigit cut in, and there it was, the real throat of it, the thing they circled every time and never swallowed. "You come home smelling like expensive liquor and applause because you sold someone another way to ruin strangers. And then you act like I should be grateful."

His jaw clenched. He'd had this conversation with senators in suits who had never held a child while they cried, with generals who smiled like they weren't talking about bodies, with investors who called anything inconvenient a rounding error, and none of them made him feel the way Brigit did when she used his own life as a mirror and dared him to look.

"It's national defense," he said, the practiced phrase tasting stale now. "It's not—"

"Don't. Don't feed me brochures." Her voice rose, not in volume, but in pitch, a violin string tightening. "I'm not stupid, Steve. I'm not a child. I know what you do. I know why it pays. I also know what it turns you into."

He leaned his hands on the edge of the island, anchoring himself, like the marble could keep him from floating away into a rage he couldn't control. "What it turns me into," he repeated, and the words were almost gentle, which made them worse. "Okay. Tell me, Brigit. What am I now?"

"You're not here." She said it with the simplicity of a fact, like gravity. "You're in your office. You're in your meetings. You're at parties with people who nod at you like you're a god because you make them money. And when you come home, you look right through me like I'm another piece of furniture you paid for and forgot to dust."

"That's not true."

"It is true. And it's been true since John was born." The name came out sharp, and his chest tightened because he remembered that year in flashes instead of days: Brigit's exhausted face, the way the baby never slept, the way

he'd said just one more quarter, just one more deal, as if time was something you could reschedule. "You checked out. You got cold. You started treating me like a function. Like I'm here to run the home so you can run your empire."

Steve's laugh finally came out, harsh and short, the kind of sound that was supposed to be disbelief but was really pain disguised as superiority. "My empire. Jesus, Brigit. Do you hear yourself?"

"I do." She stared at him, and there was a tremor in her throat like she was holding back either tears or a scream, and he understood in that moment that she'd been holding back for years. "Do you hear yourself? Every time I bring this up, you explain. You justify. You correct me like I'm misreading a spreadsheet. You never say you're sorry. You never say you miss me. You never say anything that sounds like love."

The word love was a match. He felt it light behind his ribs, hot and offended, because love was the one thing he believed he was owed credit for, even when he didn't know how to show it without turning it into a transaction.

"I have done everything for this family," Steve said, and his voice rose now, not because he meant to, but because the night demanded blood. "Everything. I didn't come from money, Brigit. I didn't grow up in a house like this. I built this. I built us. You think any of it happens by accident?"

Brigit flinched, and he hated that he'd caused it, and hated more that part of him enjoyed the power of it. "So that's it," she said, quiet again, quiet like a blade. "You bought us. And now you're mad we don't clap."

Steve straightened, the alcohol in him standing up too, turning his pride into a taller version of itself. "Look around," he snapped, sweeping a hand toward the darkened rooms beyond the kitchen, the wide hallways, the art on the walls they'd picked with a designer because it was easier than agreeing on anything. "Look at where you live. There are people who clean this place, who maintain the grounds, who take care of things so you don't have to. You drive a car that costs more than most people's yearly salary. The boys have tutors, schools, opportunities. Are you telling me I don't love you because I'm not here by nine every night?"

"I'm telling you that you don't love me because you can't stand to be with me unless you're winning," Brigit said, and something in her eyes broke

open, not tears yet, but honesty. “You’re either performing for strangers or performing for me, and I’m exhausted. I’m exhausted of being an audience. I want a partner, Steve. Not a CEO who conducts quarterly reviews of my feelings.”

His throat tightened. He wanted to say something clever, something cutting, because clever meant control and control meant he wouldn’t have to touch the raw thing inside him that whispered maybe she was right, maybe he’d let the warmth drain out of them one late night at a time. Instead he heard himself say, “You have no idea what it takes to keep all of this standing.”

Brigit nodded once, slow, like she’d expected that line, like she’d already rehearsed the response and decided not to waste it. “And you have no idea what it takes to keep a person alive inside a house like this when the man who owns it keeps leaving.”

The silence after that was thick, and the rain outside tapped at the windows like an impatient finger. Somewhere deeper in the house, a vent clicked, the HVAC system adjusting like it was trying to regulate temperature and couldn’t regulate what lived between them.

Steve pushed away from the island, suddenly needing distance, needing anything that wasn’t her face, her eyes, the way she looked both furious and done. “I’m not doing this,” he said, though he’d already done it, and he turned toward the corridor that led to the small room they’d half-jokingly called his study and half-seriously called his refuge.

His bar room was a pocket of curated masculinity: dark wood, leather, low lights, bottles arranged like trophies, a decanter that caught light like a gemstone, the kind of room you built when you wanted the world to believe you were a man of taste instead of a man who needed somewhere to hide. He went straight to the cabinet with the good stuff, the one he saved for signatures and wins, and he took out the bottle he’d been preserving like a promise to himself, a whiskey so expensive it felt absurd even in his hand.

The cork gave a soft pop, intimate, and he poured without measuring, watching amber fill the cut crystal glass until it looked like captured fire. He didn’t sip. He didn’t savor. He lifted it and took it down in one brutal swallow, the burn carving a hot path through him that almost made him feel something honest.

He poured again, heavier this time, and dropped into the leather armchair like gravity had remembered him, like the chair had been waiting with open arms and no questions. The second glass sat in his hand, and for a moment, in the dim, he could pretend the world was simple: he worked, he provided, and people were supposed to be grateful.

Brigit appeared in the doorway, not stepping in, not granting him the satisfaction of chasing her out. She watched him the way you watched an animal chewing through its own trap, and she didn't speak. Her silence wasn't defeat, it was evaluation, like she was taking inventory of what was left.

Steve held her gaze, daring her to break first, and when she didn't, the anger in him began to shift into something uglier, something like fear dressed up in contempt.

Brigit let her eyes drop, briefly, to the bottle, to the glass, to the posture of him in that chair, king of a kingdom he'd built to avoid being touched, and then she turned away without a word.

He listened, because even drunk he was good at listening for threats, for changes in proximity, for the small sounds that meant a negotiation was turning. Her footsteps moved down the hall, upstairs, into the master suite. Drawers opened. Closet doors slid. The zipper of a suitcase whispered like a secret. The house, so proud of its quiet, couldn't hide those noises, and each one struck him like a tally mark.

He stayed in the chair, gripping the second drink, telling himself she was venting, she'd calm down, she'd come back, because she always did, because the world had always bent toward his expectations eventually.

Then he heard the front door.

It closed with a finality that felt too heavy for a normal hinge, and a second later cold air threaded through the seams of the house like a warning. Headlights flared against the window glass in a pale sweep, and the sound of her engine—her SUV, the reliable one, the one she used for the boys—came alive outside, then moved backward, then forward, then out into the wet night.

Brigit was leaving.

Something in Steve's chest ripped loose, hot and panicked, and it needed an outlet that wasn't words because words were suddenly too small to carry it. He stood so fast the chair creaked, and he flung the glass at the wall with

full-body force, the way you threw a punch when you couldn't hit the person you wanted to blame.

Crystal exploded, sharp and bright, and whiskey splattered dark across the wood paneling like a wound.

He didn't breathe for a second, just stared at the shattered pieces glittering on the floor, at the stain seeping into the wall, at the evidence of his own lack of control, and then he moved, fast, purposeful, the way he moved in a crisis at work when a server went down and everyone waited for him to fix reality.

He stormed back through the hall to the garage, the air colder there, smelling of rubber and oil and the faint metallic cleanliness of a place designed to protect valuable things. His hand went to the hook by instinct, fingers closing around the spare key fob without hesitation, and the small black shape felt like authority.

His car sat under the recessed lights like a predator at rest, gunmetal gray, low and wide, a Porsche 911 Turbo S with lines too perfect to be honest, a machine built for speed and control, built for men who believed physics was negotiable if you had enough money. He'd bought it after landing his first truly massive government contract, a private reward he told himself was symbolism, proof that he'd made it, proof that nothing could keep up with him unless he wanted it to. The garage door was still closed when he slid into the driver's seat, leather wrapping around him like a second skin. The dashboard lit up, clean, precise, numbers and icons ready to obey. He started the engine, and the sound that filled the garage wasn't just noise, it was an answer, a deep mechanical certainty that made his blood feel steadier.

He punched the garage remote without looking. The door rose in front of him, letting the cold night spill in.

Then he backed out hard enough that the tires whispered against the concrete, swung into the driveway, and hit the remote again, letting the door close behind him like sealing a vault.

Rain dotted the windshield, gathering into lazy trails. The wipers rose and fell, steady, rational, like they could clear more than water.

He didn't stop to consider what leaving meant, or what chasing meant, or what it said about him that his first instinct was pursuit, not apology. He told himself he was going after her because the boys weren't here and the

roads were slick and it was late and she was emotional, and the words lined up in his head like bullet points in a presentation.

Underneath the bullet points was something simpler and uglier: she couldn't get away from the life he'd built, because if she did, then maybe it had never been enough.

He turned out of the gated drive and onto the narrow two-lane that cut through the trees, the kind of road that made the suburbs feel temporarily rural, the kind of road framed by dark trunks and blazing leaves that had one last week of beauty left before they fell and rotted. The world beyond his headlights was all shadow and wet color, the pavement shining black like it had been lacquered, and somewhere ahead, in the distance, a pair of red taillights slid between the trees and vanished around a bend.

Steve leaned forward, tightened his grip, and accelerated as if speed could stitch a marriage back together before the night tore it open completely.