

# The Awakening

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'John, can you hear me? John?'

I feel someone rub a knuckle against my sternum. My eyes are heavy, but somehow I pull them open. I try to turn my head, but I can't; instead I move my eyes, even though it hurts to do so. A shadow leans over me and I feel liquid dropping first onto one eyeball then the other. I blink to clear my eyes and find I can now move them without the pain; as things come into focus, I'm surprised to find I'm lying on a bed. No, not just lying on it, I'm strapped to it and there's something covering my mouth. Standing over me is a man in a white coat holding an empty syringe; next to him is a young woman in blue hospital scrubs holding an eye dropper and a small bottle of clear liquid. Seeing them, I pull at my restraints, not knowing what's happening and desperately trying to get away.

The man in the white coat smiles reassuringly, 'John, it's okay, your safe. You're in hospital; I'm a doctor. Do you remember why you're here?'

I think back, but there's nothing. Well, not nothing, there are memories of my childhood, of going to university, of getting married, of having children, but then things just seem to peter out. I remember something about getting ill, or was it having an accident? I fight to bring the memory to the front of my mind, feeling like I'm trying to drag my brain through molasses just to recall this single event. No, it wasn't an accident, I'd been attacked by something; or was it someone?

The man in the white coat steps to the side, revealing a tall, scared-looking woman, 'John, do you recognise who this is?'

I nod, or at least I try to, but I can only move my head few millimetres because of the way it's strapped down.

'Good, that means it's worked, we've got you back; at least for the time being.' The man gives a signal and unseen people remove the restraints and the gag that had been strapped across my mouth. I sit up but as I do so, my wrists grazing against the side of the bed sending a searing pain shooting through my body. I glance down and see my forearms are raw and bleeding. The man waves to someone and the young woman in hospital scrubs scurries forward to dress on my wounds.

I turn my attention back to the woman beside the man in white. I smile at her, 'Gabrielle?'

She steps forward, a tear running down her cheek and I notice there's something different about her. Her once beautiful hair hangs limply and is flecked with grey; her face is drawn and gaunt, with worry lines etched across her forehead. I can't understand how she's changed so much in so little time. Only yesterday, her eyes sparkled with happiness but now there's only pain and despair in them. I can't help but be struck at how much older she suddenly looks than her thirty-five years. I know that's how old she is because it was her birthday yesterday, wasn't it? We'd gone out for a meal, but something happened, didn't it? But what? My mind's starting to connect the random thoughts more freely, but still I'm confused. 'Gabrielle? What happened to you?'

'Life happened, just like it happened to you.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Look.' She holds out a mirror and I stare at the grizzled face which stares back. Not believing what I'm seeing, I touch the side of my face, feeling the rough stubble that's more white than its usual auburn. I struggle to understand what's going on. 'How long have I been here?'

The doctor examines his chart but it's Gabrielle that answers. 'Ten years. Ten years today. That was when you got attacked; when you got infected.'

I scowl, trying to remember, but failing. 'And I've been in a coma all this time?'

'No, John, not a coma. You've been ... You're a ...' She struggles to find the words.

The doctor steps forward, 'Maybe I can explain better. I'm Dr Walker, but you can call me Ben if you want.'

I shake the hand he's holding out, feeling the weakness in my arms as I do so. He doesn't seem to notice and carries on. 'You won't remember it, but there was an outbreak, a disease; no one really knows what it was or where it came from, just that it flared up briefly and then disappeared. This disease, it took over people's brains and made them attack anyone who was nearby. That's how the disease spread, through infected people biting others. At first people thought it was rabies, but there was no trace of the rabies virus and rabies doesn't spread quite as fast as this disease did. The government managed to get it under control, but most of the people who were infected had to be shot because they were too dangerous to get close enough to restrain, but you were lucky, your wife,' the doctor smiles at Gabrielle, 'managed to get you here before you started showing too many symptoms and we were able to restrain you.'

I'm still confused. 'But I don't remember anything.'

The doctor cleared his throat. 'That's because the disease shut down the conscious part of your brain, but left the basal areas unaffected. You could move and sense the world, but you weren't consciously aware any more; you weren't in control of what you were doing. It

made you incredibly dangerous, you'd attack anyone who came near, trying to bite and infect them.'

'Are you saying I was like ... like a ...' I try to think of what I'm meaning, and then the world comes to me. 'A zombie?'

Gabrielle looks away and the doctor shifts uncomfortably. 'Yes. In fact, that's exactly what we call people like you.'

'But I'm still alive, I'm not really a zombie.' Then something the doctor had just said wormed its way into my consciousness, 'People like me? There are other people who have this disease too?'

'Yes. There are thirty-eight of you in all, spread throughout the hospitals in the city. All kept in isolation, in rooms just like this, so you can't infect anyone else.'

I struggle to comprehend what's happened to me. 'But I'm cured now?'

Again the doctor shifts uncomfortably. 'No, not cured; just temporarily relieved from the worst effects of the disease, allowing you to regain control of your body and become conscious again.'

A wave of fear washes over me. 'For how long?'

The doctor glances at his watch. 'Thirty minutes; maybe forty at the most. I don't know how long the drugs will last this time. It's a new one you see, never been tried before.'

'This time?'

'Yes. We've brought you back before.'

I wrack my brain for memories. 'But I don't remember.'

'I'm not surprised. It takes time to lay down memories and we've never managed to bring you back long enough for that to happen.'

'Why do the drugs stop working?'

'We don't know, it seems to be that the disease fights back and block off the receptors which the drugs stimulate. That's why each drug only works once in each person.'

I try to take this all in, but I'm struggling. There is one question which springs to mind though. 'What will happen when the drug you used this time wears off? Will I go back to being a zombie again?'

The doctor stares down at his feet. 'Yes.'

I'm angry now. 'So why did you bring me back if it's not going to last?'

Gabrielle sits down beside me and hugs me. I remember her scent and the feel of her skin against mine. 'Because I asked him to, because I wanted to see you, the real you, one last time.' I feel her shake and realise she's crying. 'Because I wanted to say good-bye.'

I try to pull away, but she's holding me too tightly. 'I can't go on like this, seeing you strapped down, struggling against the restraints. I need to move on with my life.'

I finally break free. 'But Gabrielle, you can't leave me, not now, not when I'm like this!'

This is the only woman I've ever loved and I thought she loved me too. I can't believe she's abandoning me, not when I need her most.

She holds my hand. 'I'm not leaving you, John, you left me the moment you got infected. It wasn't your fault, but I can't keep doing this. In ten years, I've only been able to spend thirty minutes with you here; quarter of an hour there: maybe half a day in all. I can't go on like this, with just brief snatches of the real you now and then; the rest of the time you're as good as dead.'

Before I can say anything I notice my hand is shaking. At first I think it's because I'm upset, but then I realise it seems to be doing it on its own.

The doctor sees me staring at it, and checks his watch. 'Only ten minutes. Damn, I thought we'd get more time with this one.'

Gabrielle kisses me on the cheek and stands up.

'Gabrielle? Where are you going?'

She bows her head and turns away from me. 'I'm leaving. I don't want to watch as I lose you all over again.'

'But Gabrielle ...'

'No, John, not this time. This will be the last time. I've told them not to give you any more drugs. I won't bring you back again.'

Anger rises inside of me; not normal anger, but something more consuming. 'But why?'

At the door she stops and turns round to face me. 'Because it's unfair to you, John. I keep bringing you back so I can see you, spend time with you, hold you once more, whenever a new drug becomes available no matter how much it costs, but I realise now I'm being selfish; I've only been thinking about what I want, not what's best for you. You don't remember the times I've brought you back before; the anger you feel, the pain as the disease takes over again, the fear in your eyes as you know once more that you're disappearing again. I can't keep doing that to you just so I get to spend a few more minutes with you. I love you too much to put you through all that again just because I'd give anything to have you back the way you were, even if it's only for the briefest of moments.'

I feel my arm jolt and an urge rushes over me. Suddenly I want nothing more than to tear her throat out. I feel a hunger build inside me. I try to speak, but words don't come out; instead there's just a low guttural groan, sounding more animal than human. My eye sight starts to blur around the edges and the world starts to close in around me. I fight as hands from unseen orderlies grab me and roughly push me back onto the bed. I feel the restraints being attached again, but I don't feel pain as they chaff against my wounds, turning the fresh dressings red as blood oozes from them. I shake my head violently, trying to stop them putting the gag over my mouth, not because I want to speak, but because I know that once it's on I won't be able to bite

them, and all I want to do right now is sink my teeth into someone's flesh; anyone's.

The last thing I hear is Gabrielle saying goodbye, her voice cracking and filled with sorrow; then a door closes and everything's slowly fading to black. In my mind, I'm frozen with fear, screaming as loud as I can into the darkness that's engulfing me, but my body's still moving, fighting as hard as it can against the restraints, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.