



AWAKENING

When I tried to remember exactly how I came to be lying in the cold black room, my mind couldn't focus.

I could feel myself slowly climbing upward, clawing my way out of the clutches of a nightmare. This was usually a good feeling, because you knew you were just dreaming, and the nightmare was over. Except this time it wasn't. My hands felt clammy. I gripped the sheets until I knew my knuckles must be white. *Help me*, I thought. *Somebody please help me*.

I had no idea where I was, and for a terrifying second I couldn't even remember *who* I was. But then I remembered my name. Echo. Echo Stone. My real name is Eileen. When I was a toddler, I waddled around repeating everything my parents said and they called me "Echo," and it just stuck.

Remembering my name and how I got it kick-started my brain. I knew who I was. I remembered that I was sixteen years old and lived in Kirkland, Washington, with my mom and dad. It was all coming back to me. Mom was a dentist and Dad taught middle school English. Good, I could remember parts of my life. But I was still in a dark, cold room and had no idea how I got there. I held back a scream, my chest tightening. *Don't lose it, Echo, keep it together*, I told myself. *Calm down, think good thoughts*.

I pictured Andy, my boyfriend. Six feet tall, broad shoulders, blue eyes, and long golden-brown hair. He loved to feed me cookie bites and called me his rabbit. I called him Wolfie. Sometimes he got the hiccups for no reason at all and usually laughed them away. Thinking of Andy momentarily made me feel warm inside, even though the room was freezing.

Where *was* I? I was shivering and yet also bathed in sweat, my skin slick with it. I clutched for my trusty Saint Christopher necklace. But it wasn't there. Mom gave it to me to protect me when I traveled. Would it protect me now? I would never have lost it. The chain must have broken. And then I had an ugly thought. What if someone had ripped it from my neck? I shuddered. *Where are you, Andy? I need you!*

I opened my eyes as wide as I could. It was pitch black. My pounding heart told me, *This isn't some nightmare—it's real*. I hugged myself and breathed deeply, trying to calm my nerves. My shoulders were tight. I rubbed the sheets beneath me. The ones at home in my bed were soft. These were stiff and coarse. I was somewhere completely and painfully foreign. In my head I was talking to myself in a rapid voice, my fear voice: *What is this?—what is this?—what is this?*

Someone nearby was crying. I had a knot in my stomach and my throat hurt, like I'd screamed for hours. My head hurt, too, and I guessed I must have fallen, or maybe something heavy fell on me. I explored my scalp, gently at first, then more bravely,

moving my fingers, searching for a lump. I found nothing . . . no lump, no holes. My skull was intact, though my long auburn hair felt tangled and greasy. I inhaled through my nose, searching for familiar scents. Mom's cinnamon rolls, Dad's after-shave. But nothing smelled even vaguely familiar, and the odors that *did* find my nose were horrible. Smoke. Vinegar. Sulfur.

I reached for my bedside lamp—but my fingers touched something damp and stringy. *Oh god.* The knot in my stomach tightened and I yanked my hand back. I willed my eyes to adjust to the dark, but as I blinked, strange pulsing figures leapt out at me. It must have been my mind playing tricks. Right?

I took five good, long breaths, sucking in through my nose and exhaling through my pursed lips, just like my grandma Tilly taught me years ago. But five breaths weren't enough. So I took ten, and finally my heart rate slowed from a galloping panic to a steady, cautious thudding. Soon I was able to distinguish shapes. Was that a *girl* in a bed next to mine? Her hair was impossibly thick and long, spilling down her back. Her sweaty hair. That's what I must have reached out and touched. My heart returned to its punishing rhythm, a fist clenching and unclenching in my chest. The nearby crying stopped. But then it was replaced by something worse, a ripping sound, like bone being cut by a rusty saw. And then a gurgling . . . followed by a low, feral growling noise. Faraway cackling laughter. *What the hell was going on?*

I was terrified and breathing so loud I was afraid I'd wake up the sleeping girl. Something told me I should lie still and keep my mouth shut. Stupidly, I ignored it. My voice was raspy, my throat aching . . .

“Mom? Dad?”

Nothing.

“ANDY?”

The words sounded weak in the stony silence that followed. My ears strained for the comforting sound of my parents'

familiar footsteps—but I was met with more cruel noises drifting through the blackness.

I heard a faraway clock ticking and an odd whimpering, and then a cough. But it wasn't Mom's or Dad's cough; it was the cough of a child—a girl, I think. I desperately wanted this to be a nightmare. So I closed my eyes and tried to float back to sleep. But the terrifying sounds continued: the soft, almost melodic crying; the rhythmic, persistent coughing; the howls and metallic noises; the rushing water. I couldn't take it. I opened my eyes again.

“DADDY?”

An echo from the darkness. Distant. Haunting. Mocking.

“Daddy? Daddy? Daddy?”

I sensed something under my bed. The hair on my neck prickled. I imagined dangling my fingers over the side of the mattress, envisioned them being latched onto, bitten by some creature that would drag me down into its fetid pit. I held my breath and listened. There it was. Someone, or *something*, was breathing beneath me.

I slid to the edge of the bed and then slowly lowered my head, my irises widening. I peered into the shadows—and saw a pair of feral eyes peering back at me. Acid panic flooded my veins as I jerked back, thinking, *Please don't kill me. If you touch me, my boyfriend will hunt you down and beat the living shit out of you!*

I heard a rustling sound, then footsteps. I saw the creature leap out from under my bed. Its eyes found me, then it scampered out of the room, on two legs I think, a flash of white. It looked human, but it could have been something else. Whatever it was, thank god it was running from me. Or wait! Maybe it was going to gather more of its kind and they'd come back for me in a pack. My skin crawled. *Get out!*

I couldn't stay in this room. I had to get up and move. My bare feet hit the cold, wood plank floor. I took tentative steps

into the shadows. A floorboard creaked beneath my feet and I froze. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I could make out shapes. Up ahead I saw a shallow pool of light. I moved toward it.

I walked slowly, taking tentative steps, my eyes darting back and forth. The hallway felt like a perfect place for an ambush, so I was alert, my muscles taut.

I passed a closed door on my right, another on my left. I caught a scent of smoke. I heard a splashing sound, as if someone was taking a bath right above my head. I kept my gaze fixed on the pool of light that was spilling out from under a large door at the end of the hallway. As I drew closer, I could see that the door was built from thick oak planks and looked like it weighed a thousand pounds. On it hung a thick brass ring. On my right was a tall, old grandfather clock, ticking away like a metronome but with no hands to tell time with. It made me afraid and angry. What was I doing in a place *with a clock with no hands?*

I stepped closer to the thick door. My stomach tightened in fear. Something was terribly wrong. I was lost, adrift, not only in the wrong place, but I felt as though somehow I was the wrong *me*. I was jolted by a terrible thought. What if I never saw Andy again?

I raised my hand to grasp the knocker but stopped. Because I felt someone behind me.

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you,” said a voice, barely above a whisper.

I turned and saw a slight boy, thin as a reed with long, snowy hair, eating a red candy apple. The hair on the nape of my neck rose.

“Wow. You’re a pretty one,” he said.

I might have blushed. I’d never thought of myself as pretty. My nose is crooked, and ever since someone told me my eyes were too far apart, I’ve been convinced of it.

“Want a bite?” he asked, holding out the apple.