

A Preview of *The Awakening*

A novel by Paul Schmidt

Author's Note

Welcome to *The Awakening*! This story explores the weight of absence, resilience, and faith amid life's trials. In this preview, you'll meet Logan Murdock—a young man struggling with his father's military deployment and the emotional toll it takes on his family. His journey is one of deep personal transformation, where faith and uncertainty collide in unexpected ways. I hope this glimpse into Logan's world resonates with you.



Chapter 1. AWOL

Logan Murdock crouched low in an offensive lineman's stance, his knuckles sinking into the mud. The linebacker preparing to blitz should have been his sole priority—instead he saw a barracks in Afghanistan, thousands of miles away, where his dad, a Gunnie Sargent in the U.S. Marines, served a six-month deployment. Every missed video call rattled in his head like coach chewing him out for a missed block.

Be here. Just be in the moment. Logan command himself, a technique he'd heard athletes talk about—being fully in the moment. But 'being in the moment' for Logan had always meant escaping into his video games, not facing the brutal reality of the football field. His mind kept drifting, unable to anchor itself in the present, each missed block a testament to his mental absence.

Coach Harper's voice snapped his mind back to practice. "Focus up, people! One more play before we call it! Let's make it a good one."

He blinked hard, forcing his eyes to focus on the player in front of him. Instead, a grainy video screen where his dad's face should have appeared three days ago flashed *DISCONNECT*. His 195-pound body had a simple job—block the guy in front of him. He'd done it hundreds of times before.

"Ready... Set... HIKE!"

The football snapped into Dalton's hands, the team's quarterback. Logan's mind drifted—*his dad's chair at breakfast, empty now for six months. The same chair that would still be empty tomorrow, and the day after that.* By the time he focused on the play unfolding, McPherson, the defense's star linebacker, blew past Logan like he was a puff of smoke. A human battering ram heading straight for Dalton's backside.

The impact echoed across the field—a sickening crunch as McPherson drove Dalton into the mud. Logan winced as Dalton’s painful groan cut through the afternoon air. Just yesterday, he’d have made that block without thinking. But yesterday, Dad hadn’t missed their weekly video call for the third time in a row.

“Nice whiff, man,” McPherson sneered as he shouldered by, eyes glinting with satisfaction.

“Come on, Murdock!” Dalton heaved himself upright, the clinging mud heavy on his jersey, his voice raw with fury. “You trying to get me killed?”

Coach’s whistle pierced the air. “Murdock! That’s the third missed assignment today.” He jogged over, clipboard in hand, his weathered face unreadable. “This isn’t the Logan I know—the one who earned a starting spot on JV as a freshman.”

Coach lowered his voice, his eyes softening slightly. “Your dad would expect better. You earned that starting spot because you showed up every day—mentally and physically. Whatever’s going on, you need to work through it. This team counts on you.”

The mention of his father stung worse than any berating. “Yes, sir,” Logan mumbled, the military response automatic after years of hearing it at home. His eyes remained fixed on his cleats, unable to meet Coach’s gaze.

“Let’s hit the showers,” Coach hollered. “Everyone pick up a blocking dummy and carry it in.”

Logan hoisted a bag to his shoulder and trudged toward the locker room alone, the setting sun casting his shadow long across the field. His teammates’ laughter faded into the distance—jokes he used to be part of, conversations that once included him. His thoughts drifted to his phone—silent for days now, a hollow weight in his pocket. No messages from overseas. The screen’s emptiness mocked him each time he checked, a ritual that had become more torment than hope. A familiar knot tightened in his stomach as he imagined what might have happened... He’d check it again in the locker room, for the twentieth time today, fingers trembling slightly as they had each time before, heart suspended in that breathless moment between possibility and disappointment.

As his plume of exhaled breath rose in the cooling air, he couldn’t shake the thought of one more night alone in a house that felt empty as a discarded coffin.



After showering, Logan walked through the empty hallways, his footsteps echoing in the silence. Lost in thought, he collided with Mrs. Peterson as she exited her classroom.

“Logan! Excuse me,” she said, steadying herself. “You’re here late.”

“Sorry, ma’am. Just finished practice.”

Mrs. Peterson gazed at him with the same gentle understanding his mother used to show back before the deployments started wearing her down. “I was just grading today’s quiz.” She pulled a paper from her satchel. “This isn’t like you.”

Logan glanced at the D minus scrawled in red ink.

“Your dad’s been deployed a while, hasn’t he?” He looked at her, eyebrows drawn together. *How does she know that?*

“I know that’s tough,” she said. “My husband served three tours in Afghanistan with the Reserves. Sometimes it felt like time stood still until he came home.”

Logan’s expression softened as his ears perked up, surprised. His blue eyes, normally downcast when speaking to adults, darted up to meet Mrs. Peterson’s gaze briefly before finding a spot on the wall just past her shoulder. The hard lines around his mouth melted away, the ruddy complexion of his cheeks coloring slightly deeper as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Your husband’s military?” he asked, his voice quieter than he intended.

She nodded, a gentle smile on her face. “The waiting is the hardest part. But your father will come home, Logan. Just like mine did.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Logan shifted his backpack. “I should probably go.”

“Logan,” she called after him. “If you ever need to talk...”

But he was already walking away, his broad shoulders hunched against an invisible weight, his mind drifting to the gaming console waiting at home. At least there, in that digital world, he could numb the hollow ache in his chest—forgetting about missed blocks, failed quizzes, and a father whose silence gnawed at him with each passing day—a father who might or might not come home.



The next afternoon, everything changed. Logan’s phone buzzed as he left school, lighting up with the message he’d been waiting six months to see: Dad was coming home.

Ice crunched under his wheels as he pedaled hard, ignoring his third wipeout of the ride. The fall wind stung his face, but excitement numbed the cold. When his bike slid on another patch of ice, he jumped clear and let it crash into a snowbank left behind from an early snowfall as he bolted into the garage and slamming through the kitchen door.

“Mom!” His voice echoed through one empty room after another. “Dad’s coming home!”

Only the hum of the refrigerator answered him. After checking his mother’s room, he returned to the kitchen and found the note on the table:

Logan

Went to the mall with Marie. Tuna casserole in the fridge. Back later.

Love, Mom

He crumpled the note and threw it across the kitchen. Ever since Marie moved in next door last summer, it was always ‘Marie this’ and ‘Marie that’—as if his mom was sixteen instead of forty.

Logan slumped into a kitchen chair. The dishes from breakfast were still in the sink. Bills and letters spilled out of the mail pile on the counter, their edges curled like they'd been sitting there for weeks. He used to help Mom sort the mail every afternoon when he got home from school. Now, what's the point?

Just be in the moment, he told himself. It was his go-to strategy—blocking out the chaos, disappointment, the constant tension. Being in the moment meant surviving, not living. But surviving felt like all he could manage right now.

He shut himself in his room and fired up his Xbox. Killing zombies was easier than dealing with real life—at least gaming made sense. But even as he played, his dad's message kept floating back into his mind. Maybe having him home would make everything better, like Logan had been telling himself all these months.

He glanced at his phone. No new messages from Dad. No texts from Mom, either.

Late into the night, Logan played—sprawled across his bed. Memories of his dad's last deployment flooded his mind. Gaming couldn't compete with the rush of their real-life adventures—reading topographical maps, navigating rapids in their canoe, mastering new survival skills. His game controller slid off the bed in a clatter. He reached for it, but sheets tangle in legs, preventing him from reaching it. Giving up the battle, sleep overtook him as he relived their last mountain biking trek through the state forest. He had to get *into the moment*—escaping life. It was about truly being hidden from reality—something he desperately needed.



As he slept, his mind jumped across continents...

Dust swirled around the Afghan base as the Black Hawk's rotors cut through the desert air. His dad stood tall in full combat gear, every inch the Marine Gunnery Sergeant. Logan's chest swelled with pride as his father strode toward the helicopter, confidence radiating from his squared shoulders. With fluid grace, he mounted the skid, a grin splitting his chiseled face as the copter lifted off the ground, his dad's hand raised in farewell to Logan.

Then it came—the RPG, a streak of orange death against the Afghan sky. The explosion ripped through the helicopter, transforming the Black Hawk into a fireball of twisted metal and burning fuel. His father disappeared in the inferno, never to return...

"DAD!" Logan bolted upright, his throat raw from the high-pitched scream. His heart slammed against his ribs as he fought against the sheets, restraints of an invisible enemy.

A crash echoed from his parents' room, followed by stumbling footsteps and a muffled curse. His bedroom door flew open, banging against the wall. Donna stood swaying in the doorway, her red hair disheveled, wine-soured breath filling the room.

"What's wrong, baby?" She slurred, stumbling toward his bed. "Are you okay?"

Logan twisted away from her reaching hands. The acidic smell of alcohol overwhelmed her usual perfume. *This isn't my mom. Who is this drunk?*

| “I’m fine, but Dad—” he pushed her away, pointing at the imaginary helicopter still ablaze behind his eyes.

“Your father’s fine,” Donna said, gripping his doorframe for. “He always is. Always... fine.” Her voice echoed down the hallway as she staggered back to her room.

Logan lay rigid in his bed—heart still racing—as the first gray light of dawn crept through his window. He didn’t dare close his eyes again.