

THE WAKING

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This book is dedicated to my husband and three boys. They watched as I spent countless hours writing and wrestling over what you now hold in your hands. Their encouragement was always with me reminding me that I would complete this project and that it would be great. And to God my Savior who gave me both the dreams and fire to write what He put in my heart. To Him be the glory.

PROLOGUE

Amora sat up, gasping, a scream caught in her throat. Her eyes scanned the dark room. The familiar shapes of furniture and her sleeping sisters' forms came into focus; the fear began to wane. Her breathing slowed, and she swung her legs over the side of the small cot. She sat for a moment, listening to the room and beyond it to the shadows.

“Did you have another nightmare?” whispered Anna, still facing the wall in the cot across from Amora's.

Her little sister's slight form barely created a bump under the thin sheet. Amora winced as her feet touched the cold stone floor. She tip-toed a couple of steps to her sister's cot and sat on the edge. Anna shifted to her back, and Amora stroked the side of her sister's nine-year-old face. “You haven't slept tonight.”

“You know I'd rather be awake when they come for us.”

“Anna, they don't come every night.”

Amora's eyes darted to the bedroom door locked from the outside. She looked back into her sister's dark-circled eyes. “You need to sleep. If you continue to nod off during training, it will be worse for you.”

“I can’t. I try, but I’m too afraid. Being pulled out of sleep feels like waking up into a nightmare I can’t get free of.” Amora was silent for a moment. Anna reached for her hand. “What was the dream? What did you see this time?”

Amora hesitated.

“Tell me.”

Amora crossed her arms and looked over at the sleeping form of Alanna, their six-year-old baby sister. Amora turned back to Anna, dropping her voice.

“I saw a woman with dark hair, dressed in leather armor. She came to take me away from here. And then I saw death. Giants, monsters, and other terrible creatures were coming through portals and killing everyone in their path. There was blood, people screaming, and fires burning everywhere.”

“Did the woman get us too?”

Amora had a knot in her chest. “Anna, it was just a dream.” She turned away from her sister.

“Your dreams are never just dreams, Amora.”

Suddenly, the bedroom door crashed open, a deafening sound breaking through the quiet of the night. Three black-robed men strode in with violent purpose. Little

Alanna, waking abruptly from a sound sleep, sat up and screamed. One of the men, the largest, who had a blonde beard, backhanded her roughly, and she began to cry and scream even louder. The man balled his fist and moved toward the little girl again.

Anna, eyes wide with terror, clenched her thin sheet and pressed her back to the wall. Hearing her sister's screams and seeing him go toward her again, Amora's fear turned to unbridled rage. She felt a familiar switch flip inside her mind as something primal took over. She lunged for the man. Her small fists crashed into his stomach with a strength and speed that he was unprepared for. The impact immediately emptied his lungs, and he yelped as his back slammed into the wall. He collapsed to the floor, coughing and retching, as the other two men quickly jumped on Amora, taking her to the ground.

Her head slammed against the hard floor, and she blacked out.

CHAPTER I

Gianna's eyes opened to the sound of running water.
Did I leave the bathtub on?

She sat up quickly at the thought, heart pounding in panic.
"Huh? What the —?"

She shielded her eyes with her hand as she fought to adjust them to the brightness of her surroundings.

Am I dreaming?

All around her were walls of high, green hedges that went on and on as far as she could see. More likely losing my mind from the extreme stress I've been under lately. What am I lying on? Concrete? She looked down to see she was on a stone bench. Gianna ran her fingers along its smooth, cool surface. She reached up and laid her hand on her chest.

Is this leather? Oh my God, this is so bizarre!

Gianna felt panic rise in her chest. *What is going on?* Where her red, flannel pajamas had been, now she wore black, leather pants. Her top was also black leather but made of coarser material than the pants. It was stiff and had buckles with leather straps. She couldn't see the back

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but felt the straps at her shoulders crisscross as they went behind her.

Her upper arms and upper back were left bare, revealing a cross and flame tattoo on her left shoulder blade. Hardened leather guards were secured to her wrists and forearms, and her long brown hair was braided down her back. She was also clad in black knee-high, military boots.

These are awesome. I bet I look amazing in this outfit.

Gianna smiled and wondered if marathon-watching Marvel movies had prompted this dream.

This feels so real, though.

She noticed a set of short swords next to her on the bench that surely hadn't been there a second ago. She'd seen similar blades before in martial arts movies and immediately knew that they were sais.

Ha! At least my geekiness is good for something!

Gianna admired the beauty of the ornately decorated handles, which fit perfectly in her hands, and noted how the shiny metal glinted in the sunlight. She stood up, holding the weapons, and began to wonder if she had any skills with them. If it was a dream, she could probably do whatever she wanted in it.

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She walked toward a large, green hedge wall in front of her, slashed at it, and found that without thought or much effort, the blades spun smoothly in her hands. Gianna then turned and slashed another bush. “Hi-Yah!”

She also figured that’s the typical sound one should make when using martial arts weaponry. Curious, she bounded down the path, performed two summer-sault kicks in the air, and came down with a slicing, “Yaah!” She raised her eyebrows and grinned, “Woh!” She was almost giddy, wondering what else she was capable of here.

Suddenly, a hissing sound startled Gianna into a fighting stance. She turned quickly and caught her breath. An immense, black, snake-like beast writhed around the shoulders, neck, and head of a large angel statue at the end of the hedge wall. The marble warrior’s wings extended behind it, with its sword lifted as if about to strike. The serpentine creature it wore had its red eyes fixed on Gianna, and its dragon-like mouth gaped wide, revealing large fangs dripping with venom. It hissed and beat its large, leathery wings in warning.

Still in a fighting stance and afraid to move, Gianna’s heart beat loudly in her ears as she weighed her chances of escape if she ran. She gripped her blades, pointed

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one towards the beast, and glared at the monster. “I’m not afraid! This is my dream, and I’m going to win!”

Suddenly, a tingling sensation in her shoulders traveled down her arms to her hands and fingers. Gianna threw the first blade, and it struck the beast through a wing, pinning it to the statue’s chest.

It immediately let out a hair-raising screech, its thick body lashing about as it tried to free itself from the statue. As it continued to snap its horrible jaws at her, the tingling sensation turned to heat in Gianna’s left arm. She threw the second blade, and it struck the creature through the right eye. After one final screech, the beast hung limply from the statue’s chest still pinned by the wing.

Gianna breathed deeply, rubbing her shoulders as she quickly scanned the area for any other unpleasant surprises. “Okay, that was pretty serious. Cool, but serious. What could be happening to me?”

She put her hands on her hips, replaying the events from the previous night. She had laid down, cried like usual...then nothing. Panic seized her heart. Had she been drugged and kidnapped? “That still wouldn’t explain the martial arts,” she murmured aloud. She walked back towards the statue to retrieve her weapons. “Huh?”

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The creature's body was gone. Gianna turned quickly in every direction, afraid it would pounce on her at any moment...but nothing. One blade remained in the angel's chest, where the creature had been just moments before; the other lay on the ground at its feet. She whispered, "Curiouser and curiouser . . ." as she picked up the sai and placed it in her belt. She struggled to get the other blade free from the statue. After a yank, it suddenly came loose, causing her to land hard on her rear, knocking the wind out of her. She sat stunned for a moment.

Okay. This does not feel like a dream. Maybe I got sucked through a portal? I'm in Wonderland? Narnia? Oz?

"Alice didn't get fighting gear and powers, though," she said out loud. "Lord, what is happening to me? Have I been kidnapped and brainwashed? Maybe I'm strapped to a table in a lab right now.."

Once again, Gianna noticed the sound of water – the same sound she had woken up to. It seemed close by. She felt a strong need to find the water source, so she set about looking for a way to it. She was puzzled about how to locate an opening in the hedgerow or just to make one. Looking ahead, she saw only yards of green walls on both sides. She

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decided to jog through and see if she could get somewhere. As she ran, which was amazingly easy, the hedges began to blur, and Gianna realized she could run extremely fast. It felt like she could run for hours without getting winded or breaking a sweat. Then, suddenly, she was at a dead end. She attempted to stop abruptly and stumbled into the bush ahead. “Where in the world did that come from?” Gianna freed herself from the leaves. As she looked up, there was the opening she had been hoping for. She stared mouth agape at the sound’s source: a massive, five-tiered, white stone fountain.

It was located in the middle of an immense courtyard, spewing the water out tall, grand, and powerful before it fell and poured down the tiers. As the water streamed down, the churning mist formed hundreds of tiny rainbows in the moist air. Gianna walked into the mist, shut her eyes, and stood, arms splayed like a kid in a summer rain shower, as the spray covered her skin. She spun and indulged in the remarkable feelings that the fountain shower seemed to awaken in her senses.

“Um... Excuse me, Miss.”

Gianna’s eyes popped open, startled. A pretty, young Hispanic girl stood in front of her, probably no older than

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sixteen. She had short, black hair, and a long, grey cloak draped across her small-framed shoulders. She was wearing a black top, leather pants, and boots similar to what Gianna was wearing, but she had no weapons. Her big, brown eyes made Gianna think of her young son, Dylan.

“S—Sorry. I hope I didn’t disturb you, Miss, but are you from this place? Can you tell me how to get outta’ here?”

Gianna’s motherly instincts kicked in and she reached to put a hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “No, sorry, sweetie. I’m not from here and don’t know how to get out or how I got here, for that matter.”

The girl smiled. “Hey, I’m Luciana, but everyone calls me Lucy.”

“Lucy, I’m Gianna. And I’m so glad to meet you and know I’m not the only one who woke up in this weird place.” They moved away from the fountain and looked at the tree-encircled courtyard. “I’m sure we can figure out what’s happening. We found each other here, maybe someone else will come along.”

Lucy’s eyes got big, and she grinned. “You woke up here too? All I know is, I went to sleep like normal, and then I woke up in this place, dressed like I’m an extra in

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the Lord of the Rings movies!” She giggled and held out the ends of her gray cloak. “I think I’m dreaming, only it feels real. Like, I feel this wet mist all over me; I can even taste it.”

Gianna nodded, still enjoying the feeling of the mist. Meanwhile, Lucy’s face quickly turned serious.

“Miss Gianna, there’s something else that’s crazy.” She stepped closer and whispered, “I have superhero powers. I can do pretty awesome things.”

Gianna’s eyes widened. “Really?” She also whispered but didn’t know why since no one else was around. “I can too! What can you do?”

“Well, after I woke up, I was trying to find a way out of these bushes, or whatever, and I turned a corner, and these three dragon-snake things came at me all at once—“

“What, three?” Gianna absently grabbed her blade, thinking of the black creature she’d put down earlier. “I had a run-in with just one of those nasty things, which was one too many. What happened?”

“I didn’t have time to scream or run or nothin’. I put my hands up in front of me, and my whole body turned warm and, like, vibrated. And I hear these horrible screeching sounds, so I open my eyes and look. There’s this glowing

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light all around me.” She makes a big circle with her arms to illustrate. “And the Screechers...that’s what I decided to call them, because of that sound they make...are lying on the ground, squirming like worms! I guess they ran into my force field, which I think is what I put out in front of me, and they ran into it and fell back. Then they rolled over, hissed, and shook their wings, then came at me again. So, I put my hands up again.” Lucy demonstrated how she did it. “And I screamed, ‘No!’ Then I felt this power come out of my arms and hands, and all three screechers were thrown back, and just disappeared.”

“Woah! A force field?” Gianna’s eyes widened. “This is starting to sound like a Marvel movie!” Gianna clapped.

Just then, a large, incredibly muscular black man and a tall, thin blonde woman entered the courtyard through an opening in the hedge. The man’s build and dress were like a professional wrestler: bare from the waist up, and from the waist down; thick belt, black spandex pants with orange flames, and black army boots. He was also bald, sporting a thin, neat goatee.

Meanwhile, the woman was like a Greek goddess in a white, flowing, spaghetti-strapped dress. She also wore a stunning, thick gold choker and white sandals laced up to

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the knee. Her long, golden tresses were braided and tied up on her head.

The pair hadn't yet noticed Gianna and Lucy. As they stepped toward the fountain, two more figures emerged from an opening to the left. The first was a raven-haired, bearded warrior, carrying a sword and shield. He was also bare from the waist up, except for a scarlet cloak, and leather and metal guards covered his forearms, shins, and knees.

His companion was a wild-haired old man with a grey beard, robe, and a wooden staff. As these four strangers walked toward the girls at the fountain, Gianna was extremely curious about these newcomers. Were they also from the "real world?" Were they ordinary people who now had superpowers too?

All six strangers circled the fountain, looking at each other.

Just when Gianna was about to break the awkward silence, the older gentleman spoke.

"We must all drink deeply from the fountain. Drink until you can hold no more. Then, gather at the circle of fruit trees, and I will tell you what we are to do next."

Gianna didn't question the old man's words; she just obeyed and drank, as did the others. The mist alone was

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invigorating and sweet, but as she began to drink the cold water, her mind seemed clearer, and the peace that she felt upon entering the courtyard and standing in the mist intensified.

For Gianna, it felt like it had been months since she had experienced any good emotions. Lately, she walked in sadness and pain; her broken heart lay open and on display, causing dark-eyed circles and possibly a permanent frown. It was only in sleep that she was able to find some peace. In fact, waking up in this place was the first time in weeks, she didn't wake up weeping. Maybe she had been brought here to find healing.

She briefly gazed at the other five strangers, all silently drinking and wondered who they were. Did they also have some secret pain? Or were they just random individuals thrown together for some cosmic game?

She looked at the old man; he had kind, wise eyes. She hoped he would have some real answers for them. It did seem strategic in some way, now that she saw there was more here like her. No, this wasn't random. Deep in her core, Gianna knew the Power that had brought them together (assuming it wasn't a dream), had a plan and purpose for this odd situation.

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She continued to drink, feeling strangely composed and willing to wait the time to find the answers.