

STAY
AWAKE

MEGAN GOLDIN

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an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

Chapter One

Wednesday 2:42 A.M.

Starbursts blink from streetlights like they're sharing a secret as I wake to find myself slumped in the back of a cab, without any recollection of how I got here, or where I'm going.

I stare hypnotically out the window as city lights streak by against a blanket of darkness, lulled by the pensive hum of the car radio.

"Not much longer," the driver murmurs, braking suddenly at a red traffic light.

Our eyes lock in the rearview mirror until the traffic light changes and the city slides away in a swirl of neon.

"This tune is for all the insomniacs out there, looking for sleep like it's a star-crossed lover." The DJ's laconic voice disappears under the strum of an acoustic guitar.

We cross the Brooklyn Bridge listening to Paul Simon sing about the moon's desolate eyes. I look up, above the jagged skyline of the city's silhouette. There's no moon in the murky sky tonight. A siren wails ominously in the distance as we cruise through a maze of sleepy streets.

“We’ve arrived.” The driver’s voice breaks through the jumble of my drowsy thoughts.

I pay with a crumpled fifty-dollar bill clutched in my fist and cross the one-way street to the apartment I share with Amy. It’s on the second floor of an old brownstone that’s been transformed into a modern apartment block with a sundeck on the roof.

When I’m at the street door, I realize I don’t have my keys or purse. I rest my forehead wearily against the rough brick wall next to the entrance and reluctantly press the intercom buzzer to wake Amy.

“Come on, Amy. Please be home.”

Leaves fall from half-naked trees like autumnal rain. I do a double take. The leaves are not just an anomaly. They’re an impossibility. Who ever heard of fall leaves in midsummer?

Watching the leaves float ethereally onto the sidewalk deepens the disquiet I’ve felt since waking in the cab. The last thing I remember before opening my eyes was working at my sun-drenched desk by the office window until I was startled by the sudden ring of my desk phone.

“This is Liv,” I said into the receiver as I looked out at a magnificent summer sky.

Everything after that is a blank, until now.

My breath hovers in the frigid air like a restless ghost. Summer, I realize with a shiver, has disappeared like a wrinkle in time.

I press the intercom buzzer again, and again. Each time, I keep my finger on the button for a little longer until eventually the kitchen lights turn on, illuminating the stoop. I hear a clatter of footsteps on the stairs.

“Amy, I am so sorry . . .” I begin as the building door swings open.

It’s not Amy standing on the threshold. It’s two strangers. The woman is tall with straight hair. Salon gold. She wears pajamas with a blue bunny print. Her pedicured feet are bare. Next to her is a tall,

athletic man with tousled blond hair and matching stubble. He wears gray sweatpants and a white top that he lifts to scratch his taut belly.

“What the hell are you thinking, ringing our doorbell in the middle of the night?” It’s the woman who chews me out.

“I didn’t know that Amy had friends staying tonight,” I stammer, taken aback by the bite of her tone.

This is not the first time I’ve returned home to find strangers staying at my apartment. Amy is a brilliant doctor who graduated at the top of her class. I love her to death, but she can be scatterbrained about updating me on what she considers mundane things, such as friends from back home camping out on our living room floor for a couple of weeks.

“I’m Liv,” I introduce myself. “I’m so sorry I woke you. I forgot my house keys. Again.” I roll my eyes self-deprecatingly.

The woman’s humorless gaze remains fixed on me.

“That’s why I rang the doorbell. . . .” My voice fades out.

Neither of them moves out of the way. Their blank expressions unnerve me.

“Well, I guess I’d better go upstairs and get some sleep. It’s been a long day.” I step forward, eager to get into the warmth of my apartment and, hopefully soon, the comfort of my bed. As I move across the threshold, the woman slams the door shut to try to keep me out.

“Ouch.” I wince when the door hits my foot.

Despite the pain, I don’t move my foot out of the way.

“You need to go,” she tells me.

“That’s my apartment.” I point to the top of the landing.

“That’s where we live,” says the man. “You’ve made a mistake.”

I almost believe him until I catch a glimpse of the distinctive tiled hallway floor and the dark timber staircase banister with its curved edge. They’re unique period features preserved to maintain the building’s heritage character.

“I’ve lived upstairs with Amy for years.”

Recognition flashes across his face at my mention of Amy. I exhale in relief. We’re no longer talking at cross-purposes.

“Amy Decker?” he asks.

“Yes!”

“That’s the doctor whose junk mail we get,” he tells his girlfriend, as if I’m not here.

I want to tell him that Amy still lives here. As do I. I bite my tongue, aware they have the upper hand. After all, I’m the one standing out in the cold.

Soft warm light beckons from the partly open apartment door upstairs. I ache with a crushing longing to go up there and resume my life. The only way to do that is to convince them to let me in.

“I’m so sorry for the mix-up,” I grovel. “It’s been one of those nights! I’ve lost my purse and my phone.” I shiver in the cold. “Can I at least use your phone to call my boyfriend, Marco, to come and get me? It’s freezing out here.”

The woman gives me a death stare. I could die of hypothermia on the doorstep for all she cares. Her boyfriend is more sympathetic.

I look up at him, my eyes wide and pleading. He hesitates and then pushes open the street door to let me in. His girlfriend stares daggers at him for caving in. Her feet stomp angrily all the way up to the landing.

Chapter Two

Wednesday 3:08 A.M.

All my certainty disappears like a popped bubble when I'm inside. I've made an embarrassing blunder. It isn't my apartment. Sure, the layout is the same. But the decor is entirely different.

The apartment looks like the cover of an Ikea catalogue, its interior designed to an inch of its life in a *mélange* of whites and natural accents. Even the kitchen cabinets are new.

My seasoned teak dinner table, my tattered Persian rug, and my colorful artisan bookshelf filled with my eclectic collection of books and magazines have all been replaced with minimalist designer chic.

I'm about to make my apologies and leave when I catch a glimpse of brightly painted flower boxes in the apartment window across the way. I've stared at that view for years. This is definitely my apartment.

My head spins with questions. Who are these people? Where's my stuff? Most importantly, though I can hardly bear to dwell on it, why have I forgotten that I don't live here anymore?

"Where's Shawna?" I ask, sticking to practicalities.

"Who?"

“My cat!”

“There was a one-eyed ginger cat that kept sneaking in last winter. We took it to the shelter.”

“You had my cat killed?” I’m horrified they’d be so callous.

“We didn’t have her killed. We gave her to the animal shelter.”

“What do you think they do to half-blind cats?”

“Look,” the woman cuts in impatiently, handing me a phone. “We need to get back to sleep. We both have work meetings first thing in the morning. Call your boyfriend, and then go down and wait for him on the street.”

I wander through an open doorway, barely hearing her as I enter my bedroom.

“Hey, you can’t go in there!” she yells, coming after me.

The ultramodern platform bed with rumpled bamboo-cotton sheets is not mine. Neither is the metal floor lamp, or the abstract zebra print on the wall. I pick up a photo frame from next to the bed. Everyone in the picture is a stranger.

“Don’t touch that!” She snatches the frame from me.

I’m vaguely aware that her face is too close to mine. Her skin is mottled red, draining all her natural beauty. Her yelling is drowned out by a crackling sound inside my head. It gets faster and faster until it sounds like a Geiger counter hitting a radiation contamination site.

“Grant, call the cops,” she orders.

The noise in my head stops abruptly. The last thing I want right now is a confrontation with the police. I’m acutely aware the police won’t take my side. Even in my confusion, I know it looks bad for me. I can hardly explain myself to the police when I don’t have the faintest idea what’s happening.

“Wait!” I say, louder than necessary. “I’ll leave.”

I hold the staircase handrail tightly so that my legs don’t buckle under me as I walk down to the street entrance.

“Don’t come back. If I ever see you here again, then we *will* call the

cops,” the woman calls from the landing. I open the building door and step out into the cold.

Lowering myself to the top stair of the stoop, I lean weakly against the brick wall under the intercom as I try to think of somewhere to go. I’ve been cast out of my home into the cold in the middle of the night. I remind myself that it’s not my home anymore. The couple upstairs have clearly been living there for some time.

My head throbs with confusion. I pat down my pockets on the off-chance that I have my phone tucked away somewhere. In the front pocket of my jeans I find a wad of cash. There’s an object wrapped in a T-shirt in the pocket of my long cardigan.

I prop the T-shirt on my lap and carefully unwrap it. Inside is a stainless steel knife streaked with blood so fresh I can smell it. I flinch instinctively, repulsed by the thought that this was in my pocket. The knife tumbles onto a step, hitting the concrete with a metallic clatter.

I’m reluctant to touch the blade. After a moment of hesitation, I pick it up with the T-shirt and toss both the knife and the shirt into a trash can set against a brick wall. As I close the lid, I hear car doors slam farther up the street. It’s a cab dropping off passengers. I stand in the middle of the street and wave down the cab as it drives toward me, its headlights shining on the wet street ahead.

“Where to?” the driver asks once I’m inside.

I give him Marco’s address even though I don’t know how Marco will react when I turn up at his place in the middle of the night. Our relationship has clear boundaries. One of them is that we don’t drop in on each other without calling first. We don’t even have keys to each other’s apartments. I reassure myself that Marco wouldn’t want me wandering in the dark with nowhere to go.

City lights pulsate in the distance as the cab weaves through thinly trafficked streets to mournful notes of Billy Joel singing good night to his angel on the radio. As we pass a streetlight, I notice writing on the backs of my hands. I look like a human graffiti board.

A few messages are legible. Most are so washed out that they're virtually indecipherable in the streetlights strobing intermittently across me.

Above my knuckles are letters written in black ballpoint pen. I put both fists together. The letters spell out the words *STAY AWAKE*. Above my right wrist I've written the name and address of a place called *Nocturnal*.

I lean forward and tell the driver to take me there instead.

Chapter Three

Wednesday 3:44 A.M.

There's nothing familiar about Nocturnal when I press my face to the stippled glass door of the bar entrance. Smudges of color move behind the thick art deco glass like an impressionist painting coming to life.

The roar of the bar spills into the street when the doors open. The blur of colors I saw through the mottled glass turn into people in long overcoats, arranging scarves around their necks. Their inebriated eyes scan for passing cabs as they talk loudly among themselves in voices not yet modulated for the quiet of the street.

Once they pass, I grab the door before it shuts and enter a cavernous room filled with moody lighting and a deafening hum of laughter and clinking glasses.

"We're closing soon," an attendant tells me as if she knows me.

She disconnects a velvet red cord. It flops behind me as I walk inside. To my right is a closed-off section with empty restaurant tables. A cleaner in a white uniform silently mops the floor as if he is slow-dancing in his sleep.

I go down two steps into the busy bar area, where I get tangled in a party of eight rising from their table. They scrape their chairs against the floor as they get to their feet and drunkenly stumble toward the entrance. They take the bulk of the noise with them.

A few hard-core drinkers remain, swilling their drinks as they perch on stools. None of them talk to each other. They keep their eyes firmly on their liquor glasses as if that's their only source of solace. Behind the bar is a 1930s-era triple-paneled mirror.

It feels as if I'm looking at a distorted version of myself in a carnival mirror. My hair is very long and much darker than my natural honey-brown shade. It's the color of coffee: Americano. I plait it to get it out of the way, surprised at how practiced I am at a skill I don't remember learning.

A bartender with a dark goatee and white shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows to reveal a tattoo pours a drink for a man slouched on a barstool. The bartender looks directly at me, flashing a broad smile filled with warm recognition.

"Liv!"

I'm so surprised this stranger knows my name that I instinctively glance behind me to see if some other woman with the same name happens to be in the vicinity.

"I knew you'd come back before we closed." It's as if he's picking up the thread of a previous conversation.

"What can I get you, Liv? It's on the house."

"Thanks, but all I want is water," I tell him as I squirm onto a vacant barstool. "I'm not drinking tonight."

"That's not what you told me a few hours ago," he chuckles, handing me a glass of ice water.

"I was here earlier?"

The bartender's eyes dance in delight at my brain freeze. "Sure. At around ten. You had a few drinks and then you left."

"Alone?"

“You were with a dude, Liv,” he says, watching me carefully. “You don’t remember?”

My chest tightens with unease. The bartender clearly knows more about me than I do right now.

I must have been here with Marco. Maybe we were drinking. That would explain the out-of-body sensation I’ve felt since I woke in the cab.

“Everything’s fuzzy right now,” I explain. “What did he look like, the guy I was with?”

“I only saw the back of your heads as you left. The place was jam-packed. You know what it’s like when we have a live band playing.”

I smile knowingly, even though I don’t remember anything. Not the bartender. Not this bar. Not the man I left with last night. I change the subject and ask whether I left my purse or my cell phone when I was here earlier. They both appear to be missing.

“Not that I’ve seen, but I’ll ask the staff once we close and let you know when you come in tomorrow.” He pours liquor into a cocktail shaker.

I’m so focused on trying to reconstruct last night from the tiny scraps of information he’s given me that I jump when he puts a cocktail glass in front of me and asks me what I think.

“It’s a new take on a gin and tonic. I use ginger ale instead of tonic. Try it.”

I shudder as the liquor hits my throat.

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s pretty good, actually. It’s just that I’m not in the mood for alcohol tonight.”

I stifle an exhausted yawn. The brass clock on the wall says it’s close to four in the morning. “I should go. It’s way past my bedtime,” I joke.

“You’re never in bed at this time,” he assures me.

“Then where am I?”

“Here. Drinking. Talking to me. Taste-testing my new cocktails. Anywhere but in bed.”

“Why?”

“You hate sleeping. Especially at night.”

The manager announces the bar is closing in five minutes. As if in unison, all the stragglers sitting along the bar swallow what’s left of their drinks and trail out of the main doors to the street. I hang around talking to the bartender as the staff pile chairs on tables.

“How do you know so much about me?”

“You tell me all your secrets,” he teases.

“What secrets?”

In answer, he gestures toward the ballpoint letters above my knuckles that spell out the words *STAY AWAKE*. I snatch my hands away in embarrassment.

“I sometimes write reminders to myself,” I explain, self-consciously. “It’s a bad habit. From when I was a kid.”

“You do it so you don’t forget stuff. Like this.” He points to writing on my hand that says: *DON’T SLEEP!* Below it, partly hidden by my sleeve, it says: *WAKE UP.*

“What do I have against sleep?”

“You’re afraid of what you do in your sleep.” He flips a white cloth off his shoulder and wipes a beer glass dry as his words sink in. “At least, that’s what you told me the other night.”

“What could I possibly do in my sleep?” I ask.

Then I remember the bloodied knife.