

SWEETEST DARKNESS

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*For all the caretakers of the world,
who give up so much*

This is the Dark Place.

I sing it.

This is the Dark Place.

I hum it in my little cave.

My voice keeps me company.

And I can feel it,

the starlight beating

on the outside,

like rain.

A hailstorm.

A hurricane of light.

CHAPTER ONE

We had no business going to the Alvarado that night.

Then again, it wasn't like we had a choice.

June and I shivered in the parking lot, watching the broken-down hotel watch us. Above the tiled roof, the Milky Way stretched, bright and fathomless. Gram used to call it a highway to nowhere in particular.

Tonight, I felt it leading us here.

“What’s taking Selena so freakin’ long?” I buttoned up my jacket, the denim collar scraping the stubble on my chin.

June didn’t answer. Instead she blew on her hands, blond hair gleaming under the pale light of the waxing crescent moon. She fished a black beanie out of the pocket of her hoodie and slipped it on.

Around the Alvarado’s dark shadows and opulent rot, the desert rolled out on every side. A lonely mile away were the squat buildings of Gypsum’s outskirts—too far to hear us scream, which June had already pointed out.

“Got a joke for you,” I said.

June shivered and stamped her feet to keep warm.

“Two girls and a guy walk into a haunted hotel—”

“Quinn, I think we should go home.”

“—and one of them says, ‘Quinn, I think we should go home.’”

“Then why don’t we?”

I had no follow-up joke. No punch line. None of us had planned this little excursion. None of us called, or texted, or spoke about it, even though we saw each other every day at school, spent every weekend together. I'd arrived first, on foot, after telling my brother I needed to take a walk, which turned into a two-mile hike. My feet just led me here. Then June showed, materializing out of a pickup with Texas Longhorn plates, waving goodbye to some stranger she'd just hitched a ride from. And of course Selena would come.

She had to.

We'd spent the last four months resisting it, the urge to give in to this place. Every night, I'd had the same bizarre dream—and so had they. In the lunchroom last week, June had casually mentioned her “nightmares,” and we'd all fessed up. Compared stories. Realized an abandoned hotel on the edge of town was *calling* to us, sweet as a lullaby. Then the three of us sat in a pocket of silence in the cafeteria, speechless, in the aftermath of an earthquake only we felt.

Now, here we were, at 11 p.m. on the first night of winter break, waiting for Selena, letting the Alvarado tell us what to do.

A crunch of gravel from behind, and Selena appeared out of the dark, rolling in on her bicycle, a lithe shadow swallowed by her dad's old sheriff's jacket, black hair spilling out of her hood. She stepped off and let the bike fall, expression bewildered, like she'd sleepwalked here. Without a word, she stepped up next to us, and we stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the Alvarado.

The hotel loomed over us, all that darkness inside pressing against the windowpanes.

“I'm pretty sure I've seen this movie before,” I said.

June nodded. “The one where the blond chick gets whacked in the opening scene.”

Selena frowned and pulled a flashlight out of her pocket, then flicked it on, her breath fogging in the cold. “Let's just peek in the windows, then go.”

“Won’t be enough,” I said. The sudden glare of Selena’s flashlight blinded me, and I held up a hand to shield my eyes. “We’ll just end up back here tomorrow night.”

She huffed. “Quinn O’Brien, when you talk like that, you really freak me out.”

“Because you know it’s true.”

A peppering of stars reflected in the windows. I tilted my head. The hotel seemed to tilt too, following me. No, it wasn’t following me. Was I following it? I blinked and my tiny reflection caught and stretched, then warped until my stomach flipped.

Behind us, on the edge of town, the Gun Barrel Trailer Park glimmered as a sea of blacks and grays. I used to go there when I still read tea leaves, selling a glimpse of the future for twenty dollars a pop. Maybe I shouldn’t put Selena through this. The first trailer was only a half mile away by foot. Maybe I should take my two friends by the hand and leave.

The thought seemed to pull some kind of trigger. A tug inside my chest. The Alvarado . . . it was disappointed. I always disappointed people. Even my brother thought so. Ollie’s voice played in my head: *Why you gotta make everything so hard?*

I sighed.

“Uh-oh,” Selena said.

“Uh-oh, what?”

“I *know* that sigh.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get this over with.”

I led the way across the parking lot. Clumps of prickly pear had broken right through the concrete, reaching their paddles toward the sky. I stepped up on the porch, my boots thudding hollow on the boards, and stopped short of the door. Selena ran into me from behind and yelped.

After four months of the same maddening sequence playing every night, it wasn’t like I didn’t know what to do.

Up the grand staircase.

Through the spa.
Down the corridor.
Past the row of six framed photos.
Find room 336.

And then . . . and then what? That was when the dream always ended and everything faded to black, like a movie changing scenes. And every morning, I'd wake up and ask myself, *What happens next?*

Something good?

Or would we end up like those ghost hunters a few years ago? Just *gone*, their beat-up car out front, keys still in the ignition?

But I had to know.

I grabbed the doorknob and pulled. It came off in my hand. A pane of glass in the door fell and shattered. Behind me, Selena grabbed the back of my jacket.

June walked right past, wedged the door open with her boot, and slipped through, the white graphic on the back of her hoodie—WEST TEXAS REGIONAL CHAMPS—melting into the dark, along with the coiled outline of a snake, poised to strike.

I dropped the doorknob and followed, my boots crunching over broken glass.

The inside of the hotel was colder than out. I drew in a breath that tasted musty, then shivered. June had disappeared. Typical. Now that she'd made up her mind, she put her fear in a box and brought out the false bravado.

I flicked on my flashlight. "June?" I called out, then raked my beam over the mahogany paneling, the checkout desk, the cavernous ceiling.

June wandered near the bar, then disappeared behind the staircase that wound majestically to the second story. Selena stayed by my side.

Gram's stories about the Alvarado came back to me: what it was like in the glittering thirties, all lit up and freshly painted, the front porch brimming with parties and cocktails and big-money deals, actresses holding court on the upper balconies, where the beautiful people would

wait for sunset, to *ooh* and *ahh* over the night stars as they appeared, like frozen fireworks.

At the top of the stairs, the black thickened. From nowhere came the thought that the darkness on the other side wasn't just creepy or endless. That the darkness was *sweet*. But not a normal, good kind of sweet. I could almost taste it on my tongue.

I pointed my flashlight at the top landing, squinting. Torn wallpaper. Doorways. Nothing but—

From behind, a pair of hands closed in on my shoulders. "Boo!"

I jumped a foot. Selena screamed. June's laugh echoed in the lobby.

"And I thought you were a big tough guy, Quinn," June said.

"You thought wrong."

Selena looked at the doors we'd just come in, as if considering making a break for it, but turned back to June and whisper-hissed, "Stop creeping around with your flashlight off."

June didn't need one, because she was June, but I dug in my pocket for my small backup, then handed it to her. "Just humor us, okay?"

A grumble, followed by a pencil-thin glow. We swept the beams up the grand staircase.

I'd seen it all before—in the daytime. There wasn't a kid in Gypsum who hadn't come out here on a dare, slipped past the NO TRESPASSING sign to play "Chopsticks" on the haunted piano, which only sounded haunted because it was out of tune. In middle school, when Gram got sick, we came dozens of times. Explored the jumble of furniture on the west side, made up stories about how it was a barricade to keep out zombies. Then we'd sit on the checkout desk and flick the broken bits of wasp hives at each other, yell swear words and listen to them echo, the sunbeams turning the Alvarado into nothing but a playground.

But everyone in Gypsum knew the Alvarado changed at night.

I started up the stairs, past the line of broken beer bottles that marked the edge of the zone where locals were willing to go. June and Selena followed, the chandelier I'd seen in my dreams catching our

beams, shattering them. I stared at the glimmer, not fighting—just accepting—the urge to count each teardrop. That was what the dreams nudged me to do. *Count them*, the dream said, without uttering a single word.

I'd almost reached the top when my phone rang.

"Feliz Navidad..."

I fumbled for the phone in my pocket as José Feliciano's voice echoed through the cavernous space, cursing my decision to let Selena mess around with my ringtones. Then I stumbled into the banister. The wood cracked.

"Quinn!"

Selena pulled me back from the edge just as the railing detached and plummeted to the floor below. The song echoed off the walls. I searched blindly for the side button.

"Shut that off!" Selena said in a whisper-hiss.

"I'm trying!" I pulled away from her. My brother's name appeared.

Missed call.

I started to type a text, my face heating up. Ollie, always hovering. So that's what I typed.

stop hovering

Before I could press send, the phone rang again. Selena grabbed for it.

And it slid out of my hand, hit the stair, bounced off. A second of silence followed by a sharp crack as it slammed into the floor.

June peered over the edge. "Well, that's not optimal."

While June and Selena stayed up on the stairs, I collected the shattered remains of my phone. Cradled it in my hands and swore into the dark. Three months of side hustles at the Gun Barrel Trailer Park. Three months of reading tea leaves. Three months of seeing *those expressions* on the faces of the people who'd asked me—even begged me—to tell them the future. Gratitude. Wonder. Fear. Then Ollie's expression when he'd found out what I'd been doing and shut everything down, acting like a warden rather than an older brother.

I looked up at Selena, who watched me with her hands clasped in front, her signature *I'm sorry* pose.

My anger carried me back upstairs but evaporated as I followed June and Selena to the hallway beyond, which led to a set of double doors. This was the point in the dream where I took the lead, put my palm on the doors, pushed and watched them swing wide open. How satisfying it felt to open things. That was what four months of the dream whispered to me. *Open everything.*

I directed my flashlight inside, sliding the beam over the metal tubs. It was the spa, where the movie stars and gangsters and well-heeled city folk went to sink their bodies into Gypsum waters. Trying to stay young forever, Gram used to say.

June brushed by me. I swept my beam over fancy cabinets, glass bottles coated in dust, a tiled shower, spiderwebs trailing from the ivory handles.

Then June tilted her head back and whooped.

Selena pointed the flashlight in her face. "Stop it!"

"No," June said. "Listen." She whooped again.

June stood only a few feet away, but her voice seemed distant, like it was funneling down a long tunnel. I'd always heard that the Alvarado played tricks with sound at night, like the gypsum mines did, but in the darkness of the spa, the echo of June's voice coming from somewhere behind me made gooseflesh erupt on my arms.

"That's so cool," June said, her voice full of false courage that was too easy to recognize.

Selena's beam skittered over the edges of a ragged hole in the wall. "Oh yeah, *so* cool, just like a haunted carnival. Can we leave now?"

June ignored her and moved between the tubs, starting up a whisper-sing of "Old Town Road," which seemed like it was coming from my left rather than my front. I searched the corners, my light cutting into the soft darkness.

A passageway out of the spa, lined with doors. At the end, a T junction.

Next to me came Selena's quiet voice. "Honeycomb."

"What?"

She shook her head, like she was trying to shake something loose. "Remember? In the dream, this is where it all becomes a honeycomb."

Although our destination was always the same—room 336—our individual dreams had strange differences. For her, the deep passages of the hotel became a honeycomb; for me, stone tunnels, coming apart; for June, masses of tangled string.

We started down the hall, my heart picking up speed, like it knew any moment the walls would crumble and I'd be buried under tons of plaster and stone.

I firehosed my light around, pausing on the brass numbers. Room 251, where Judy Garland once slept. Room 247, Bonnie and Clyde's supposed hideaway. Room 241, where the chambermaid was murdered. A half dozen other names slipped through my mind—the dead, the famous, the forgotten.

We kept going. Searching. For what, we had no idea.

Another stairway led us into another hall of suites. The stagnant air clogged every breath. We reached a line of six framed photos full of strangers in sepia tones. Next to them was a door with a brass plaque.

Room 336, where that Hollywood director died, the one who shot *Dead for Dollars* and *Dark Noose* and all those other B Westerns that almost everyone had forgotten.

I looked at Selena, then June. We were finally here.

I pushed the door open with my boot.

Inside, outlined in moonglow, was a sitting room, and beyond that—past a door hanging from its hinge like a lolling tongue—were a bed, a nightstand, and a closet. A window yawned halfway open. The fresh smell of the desert replaced the musty scent of the halls.

June stepped into the room and turned in a circle. "This is it. Three thirty-six." She looked at me, triumphant. "We did it."

I swung my light around the room. It was bigger than the others

we'd passed; less dilapidated, too, although the wallpaper still sagged and the fancy sconces dripped with cobwebs.

"Now what?" June asked.

"We should look for clues," I said.

"Clues?" Selena asked.

"I don't know." I put my head in the closet. "A bloody knife? A ghostly message?"

"It's just a room," Selena said. "Like all the others."

A cold wind blew through the window. On the bare mattress next to it, a flutter. My beam caught a stack of white paper, marked up with ink. I stepped closer. Picked up a page.

It was covered in numbers.

I dropped it and picked up another. And another. More numbers. Random, scrawled, endless. There had to be a hundred pages of them.

Then a voice came into my head.

Whispering and urgent, but too garbled to understand. I pressed the heel of my hand against my forehead and willed it to stop.

"Can you hear that?" I asked.

Selena turned to me. "What?"

A rustle. Not inside my head this time, but out there, in the hall. Selena's light swung to the doorway. Lit up the torn wallpaper.

The rustle again. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and the urge to run hit me. I glanced at the window. Three stories down from there. Then I looked back at the doorway. Maybe it was nothing? Just something soft running along the floors. A rat, perhaps. Only...

I met Selena's eyes. She didn't want to check. I didn't want to check.

But I closed my eyes for a second, opened them, and then forced myself to step past June and lean into the corridor.

To the left, darkness. But to the right...

The last door of the hall was open. And there was a light on.

The sound came again. Something moving, thumping. Like the flutter of moth wings against a spiderweb. Large moth wings.

I motioned to June and Selena, and they slipped past me. Then the three of us retreated on silent feet around the corner, away into the pitch black.

We paused there, backs pressed against the wall, just breathing. I checked around us: pointed my beam down a hall that stretched long, its line of doors closed, until I caught a glimmer on a mirror at the far end. Empty. We needed to leave. Now.

“What *was* that?” came Selena’s quiet whisper.

A tug on my flashlight. Before I could react, it was gone. June had taken it right out of my hand. The glow flicked off.

“*What are you doing?*” I whispered.

Selena’s beam jittered wildly. “No, June, I need it!”

“I need to *see*. Just trust me, okay? Can’t you just trust me?”

I reached out for my flashlight, a spike of panic in my chest. Fumbling in the gloom, I hit something, and a clatter followed.

Complete darkness. The world turned into velvet, crushed against my face. I couldn’t breathe. “June?”

Selena’s voice came from the floor, whimpering. I heard the soft scrape of her bare hands on the hardwood. “The batteries came out. June, where are you?”

“Trust me!” Her footsteps receded, softening down the hall, deeper into the hotel.

I dropped down beside Selena, feeling blindly over the floor for the batteries. Along the walls, in the drifts of leaves. Gone. I stood. “Selena, let’s just get out of here.”

“No freaking way,” she said, her voice thin, panicked. “I’m not walking around in the pitch black.”

“It’s not like we don’t know the way...”

“No! June’ll be back soon. She never leaves us for long!”

Selena had a point. And I didn’t much want to feel my way blind through the Alvarado.

I thought about our games of Marco Polo on moonless nights, when

the darkness was a blindfold for Selena and me, but not June—who, for God knows what reason, saw best in the dark, like a cat. There were a lot of things like that in Gypsum, things you couldn't explain.

Marco Polo. That's all this was. A game, and the hotel was our swimming pool. We'd call out, and soon enough, she'd come back...

I leaned against the wallpaper, my shoulder touching Selena's. The cold insides of the hotel seeped through my skin, the faint smell of mold passing over me like a breath.

Selena shifted. Then her fingers brushed once through the hair at the base of my neck, where it curled by the collar. I was so surprised I didn't react at first, flashing back to the kiss last year, the one we never talked about. The warmth of her hand left, then returned, this time a nudge against my palm. It felt like a question.

She was afraid. So was I.

I threaded my fingers through hers. Blinked into the inky air, breathed in the sweetness. And suddenly it dawned on me why that word kept welling up in my head.

Sweet... like the inside of a pitcher plant.

"Quinn?" Selena asked, her voice soft, like it was far away, like June's voice had sounded in the spa. The Alvarado, playing tricks on me again.

I squeezed her fingers. "Yeah, I'm here."

"Where are you?" Her voice was farther away now. "I can't find you."

It took a moment for me to put it together: Selena here, Selena there. Impossible.

And then the hand holding mine wasn't warm anymore.