

A
Kiss
So
Cruel

AVELLEY GREER

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"To be a star, you must shine your own light, follow your own path, and don't worry about darkness, for that is when the stars shine brightest."

- Napoleon Hill

Chapter One

Allegra was dying, and all Briar could do was watch.

The monitors beeped their mechanical rhythm while her sister's chest rose and fell in shallow breaths that seemed too fragile to sustain life. Briar wrapped her fingers around Allegra's small hand, the skin fever-hot and papery beneath her touch. It wasn't fair.

Less than a week ago, Allegra had burst through the front door of their small house, blue first place ribbon clutched in her fist, shouting about George's inability to spell spaghetti. Now she lay still as carved marble, her dark hair fanned across the hospital pillow like spilled ink—machines doing the work her body had forgotten.

"Miss Delarosa?"

Briar turned to find Dr. Locklear in the doorway, clipboard pressed against her chest. The doctor's expression carried that particular weight medical professionals wore when delivering news they'd rather not share.

"Can we speak in the hall?"

Briar glanced at her mother's sleeping form in the corner cot. June's fingers twitched against the thin hospital blanket, caught in dreams that made her whimper like a wounded animal. Better to let her sleep. These days, consciousness brought no relief.

The hallway smelled of industrial disinfectant and despair. Other families huddled in waiting areas, their faces mirrors of Briar's own exhaustion. Dr. Locklear led her to a small alcove with two plastic chairs that had seen too much grief.

"The latest labs came back." The doctor's pen clicked against her clipboard in a nervous rhythm. "Her white cell count continues to drop. The fever shows no signs of breaking despite our interventions."

"What about the specialists from Portland?" Briar's voice came out rougher than intended. When had she last had water?

"They're... puzzled." Dr. Locklear's professional mask slipped for a moment, revealing the frustration beneath. "In thirty years of practice, I've never seen anything quite like this. The symptoms don't match any known pathogen or autoimmune condition. It's as if her body is simply... giving up."

The words hung heavy between them. Briar's fingernails dug crescents into her palms, the sharp pain keeping her anchored when everything else threatened to dissolve.

"There must be something else we can try. Experimental treatments, clinical trials—"

"We're exploring every option." The doctor leaned forward, her voice gentling. "But I need you to understand the reality of the situation. Without a diagnosis, we're fighting blind. We're managing symptoms, not treating the cause."

"How long?"

Dr. Locklear's pen stilled.

"At the current rate of decline... days. Maybe a week."

The floor seemed to tilt. Briar gripped the chair's metal frame until her knuckles went white. Days. After everything—their father's death, their mother's slow unraveling, the endless shifts at the diner and the coffee shop just to keep the lights on—they had days.

"Your mother mentioned something about alternative treatments." Dr. Locklear's tone shifted to carefully neutral. "Something about the forest?"

Ice flooded Briar's veins. She forced her expression to remain steady even as her pulse hammered. "My mother isn't well. The stress..."

"I understand. But at this point, with conventional medicine failing..." The doctor spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Some families find comfort in exploring every avenue, however unconventional."

"You're telling me to take my dying sister into the woods based on my mother's delusions?"

"I'm telling you that sometimes hope matters more than logic." Dr. Locklear stood, smoothing her white coat. "We'll continue doing everything we can. But perhaps... Perhaps there are things beyond what medicine can explain."

The doctor left Briar alone with those words echoing in the sterile air. Beyond what medicine can explain. As if Briar hadn't spent twenty years watching her mother chase shadows through trees, muttering about bargains and kings and debts unpaid.

She returned to find June awake, perched on the edge of Allegra's bed with her fingers tangled in her daughter's hair. The afternoon light streaming through the window caught the silver threading through June's dark strands. When had her mother gotten so old?

"She's cooler," June whispered without looking up. "Just a little, but I can feel it."

Briar pressed her palm to Allegra's forehead. The fever still raged, turning her sister's skin into a furnace that consumed itself from within. "Mom..."

"You have to go into the forest, Briar." The words tumbled out in a desperate rush. June's hands trembled as she stroked Allegra's cheek. "Today. While there's still time."

Heat crawled up Briar's neck. Not this. Not now. Twenty-five years of the same delusion, the same story that had made them the town's charity case. The crazy woman who believed in fairy tales. How many parent-teacher conferences had Briar sat through, watching teachers' expressions shift from concern to pity when June mentioned the forest king? How many times had

Child Services shown up because June told the wrong person about her "bargain"?

And now, with Allegra burning up from the inside, her mother wanted to retreat into fantasy again.

June's fingers found the scar along her lower back, picking at it the way she always did when the forest stories started. "I know you don't believe me. I know you think—"

"There is no goblin king!" The words exploded out before Briar could stop them. A nurse glanced through the door window, and Briar forced her voice lower. "There is no bargain. There's just a sick little girl who needs real medicine, not fairy tales."

"You're wrong, Briar. He saved us both that night. You were so small inside me, barely holding on after the accident..."

"You were traumatized." Briar's hands clenched in her lap. "You created a fantasy to cope, and I've spent my entire life dealing with the fallout."

June flinched, her shoulders curling inward. The familiar fog crept back into her eyes as she retreated from Briar's anger. "I... I know how it sounds. I know you don't..."

She trailed off, fingers still worrying at the scar. The silence stretched between them, broken only by Allegra's labored breathing and the steady beep of monitors.

"Mom." Briar forced her voice softer, seeing her mother shrink into herself. "I can't do this right now. Not with Allegra like this."

"But the forest—"

"Please." The word came out raw. "Just... please stop."

June's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before she nodded, turning back to Allegra. But her lips kept moving, forming silent words Briar knew by heart. *Into the forest. Find him. Make a bargain.*

The monitors continued their electronic lullaby. Somewhere down the hall, a child cried for their mother. Briar wanted to shake June, to scream, to do something to shatter this recurring nightmare of delusion and magical thinking. But Allegra's labored breathing held her still.

"Even if I believed you," Briar said carefully, "what exactly am I supposed to do? Walk into the woods and yell for the goblin king? Hope some fairy tale creature takes pity on us?"

"You find him." June's voice was small now, almost childlike. "You go to the old growth forest past Miller's Creek. You walk until the paths stop making sense. And when you can't find your way back, he'll find you."

"This is insane."

"Please." The word cracked on a sob. June's carefully maintained composure crumbled like wet sand. "Please, Briar. I can't lose her. I can't... I can't lose my baby too."

Briar stared at her mother's tear-streaked face, at the desperation etched into every line. Behind them, Allegra's breathing hitched, stuttered, then resumed its fragile rhythm. The sound drove a spike of pure terror through Briar's chest.

Days. Maybe a week.

"If I do this," she heard herself say, "if I go to the forest and find nothing—because there will be nothing to find—you have to promise me something."

Hope bloomed across June's features like sunrise. "Anything."

"You stop this. All of it. No more stories about bargains and kings. No more disappearing into fantasies while the real world falls apart around us. You get help, *real* help, and you focus on being present for whatever time Allegra has left."

The words tasted bitter, like admitting defeat. June's throat worked as she swallowed, her gaze sliding to her dying daughter.

"All right," she whispered. "If you don't find anything, I'll... I'll stop."

Briar rose on legs that felt disconnected from her body. She pressed a kiss to Allegra's burning forehead, breathing in the scent of shampoo and antiseptic that clung to her sister's skin.

"I'll be back soon, Ally-cat," she murmured against the fever-damp hair. "Try to hang on for me, okay?"

No response. Just the machines and the monitors and the terrible weight of borrowed time running out.

The car's engine hummed beneath Briar's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Mile markers blurred past as she drove deeper into the mountains, each one carrying her further from reason and closer to desperation. The GPS had lost signal twenty minutes ago, leaving her with nothing but faded road signs and the sick certainty that she was making a terrible mistake.

This is insane, she told herself for the hundredth time. Chasing fairy tales while Allegra dies.

But what choice did she have? The doctors had run out of options, their careful explanations dissolving into medical jargon that all meant the same thing: there was nothing more they could do. And June... God, June was barely holding it together as it was. If they lost Allegra, her mother would shatter completely, retreating into that familiar emotional void where Briar could never reach her.

The thought sent a familiar ache through her chest. All these years spent trying to earn her mother's attention, of being the responsible one, the caretaker, the daughter who stayed. Always the odd one out, especially after David came into their lives when Allegra was born. Four years of watching them be a real family while she orbited the edges. Then one fight about money and he was gone—no goodbye, no explanation. June shattered, and suddenly Briar was needed again. Needed, but never quite seen.

She should have left when she turned eighteen like any normal person. She should have gone to college somewhere far away, built a life that didn't revolve around managing her mother's fragile mental state.

But she couldn't. Not when Allegra needed her and she was the only thing standing between her little sister and June's cycles of neglect and overwhelming guilt. Briar had even swallowed her pride when Allegra got sick, calling David's old number, leaving messages. His actual daughter was dying and he couldn't even text back.

The familiar landmarks began to appear. The rusted mailbox that marked the Henderson property, the burned-out shell of an old barn, the sharp curve where the mountain dropped away into shadow. Twenty-five years. Her

mother had spent twenty-five years spinning tales about this place, about bargains made in blood and shadow. Briar had driven to the only location that made sense, the exact spot where their car had careened off the highway, where her father died and her mother claimed to have been saved.

The forest loomed before her, ancient Hemlocks standing sentinel against intrusion into their shadow realm. Behind them, old growth maples and black cottonwoods stretched skyward, their branches twisted into arthritic claws that seemed poised to snatch any soul foolish enough to venture close. The sensation of being watched pressed against Briar's skin, raising goosebumps despite the afternoon warmth.

Even with the sun hanging high, the space beyond the tree line swallowed light whole. Darkness pooled between the trunks, thick and viscous. The wrongness of it churned in her stomach with each breath of too-sweet air that drifted from the depths.

The memorial cross tilted at a drunken angle, white paint flaking away. Offerings littered the ground around it—plastic flowers bleached colorless by sun, a moldering teddy bear, rain-warped photographs. The inscription carved into the wood had weathered but remained legible: *Stars Cannot Shine Without Darkness*.

Briar traced the letters with trembling fingers, the rough grain catching at her skin. "I wish you were here, Dad." The words scraped past the tightness in her throat. "Mom says you always had the answers, that you could find light in anything. I try, but lately..." She pressed her palm flat against the wood. "I can't do this alone anymore."

Tears blurred her vision before she realized she was crying. She swiped at them roughly, angry at her own weakness. "Sorry. I promised Allegra I'd be strong. She's dying, Dad. The doctors don't know why. And Mom thinks—God, she actually believes something in these woods can save her."

The silence stretched between her words and the empty air, broken only by the distant call of a crow and the whisper of pine needles overhead. Briar pressed her forehead against the weathered wood of the cross, breathing in the scent of old rain and decay. Part of her wanted to stay here forever,

suspended in this moment where she could pretend her father might actually answer, where the weight of impossible choices didn't crush down on her shoulders. But Allegra was waiting, and time was a luxury they'd already run out of.

So she straightened, wiping the last of the tears from her cheeks, and turned toward the forest that had haunted her mother's stories for as long as she could remember.

Wind erupted from nowhere, violent and purposeful. Autumn leaves whirled up in a cyclone of crimson and gold, whipping her hair across her face. The trees groaned, bending away from something she couldn't see. Through the chaos of debris and shadow, movement flickered at the forest's edge—a figure dissolving back into darkness before her eyes could focus.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. The wind pulled at her clothes, her hair, trying to drag her toward the trees. Yet the forest itself remained still, untouched by the gale that battered everything else. The wrongness of it made her teeth ache.

Cold bloomed in her chest, spreading through her veins. She stumbled back toward her car, but the wind died as suddenly as it had risen. In its wake, the scattered leaves had arranged themselves into a perfect path leading directly to the tree line.

"You're losing it." She kicked at the leaves, sending them flying. They swirled through the air, then settled back into the exact same pattern. She kicked them again. Same result. The path reformed with mechanical precision, as though it were waiting.

Her keys weren't in her pocket.

Panic flared as she searched the ground around the memorial, dropped to her knees to comb through dead grass and gravel. Nothing. She'd had them just minutes ago, had used them to drive here, had—

A metallic jingle drew her attention to the forest edge. There, glinting in a shaft of reluctant sunlight, her keys dangled from a low branch just past the tree line.

Every instinct screamed danger. Keys didn't move on their own. Leaves didn't form paths. Wind didn't blow in only one direction. But Allegra's face swam before her, pale and fading, and her mother's desperate words echoed: *Find him. Beg if you must.*

She approached the forest edge slowly, each step a betrayal of common sense. *Just grab the keys. Three seconds. In and out.*

Her foot crossed the threshold between sunlight and shadow.

The world lurched sideways. Temperature plummeted twenty degrees in an instant, her breath misting in air gone thick and syrupy. The stench hit her—rot and green growth and something sickly sweet that coated the back of her throat. Above, branches knitted together with deliberate intent, weaving a canopy that devoured light.

Her keys had vanished from the branch.

She spun back toward the road, but vertigo sent her stumbling. The highway shimmered and warped, her car a distant smudge of color through bending air. She took a step toward it and found herself exactly where she'd started.

A branch snapped in the underbrush. Heavy and deliberate.

Bear, her panicked mind supplied. Black bears were common here. *Make noise, make yourself big, back away slowly.* But when she opened her mouth to yell, only a whisper emerged, the sound swallowed by oppressive quiet.

Another crack echoed through the trees, this one sharper, closer. To her left.

Briar's breath caught as she slowly turned her head. Nothing but shadows and the gentle sway of branches. But the forest had gone unnaturally quiet. There was no birdsong, no rustle of small creatures in the underbrush. Even the wind had stilled.

Movement flickered in her peripheral vision. To her right.

Her pulse hammered against her ribs as she whipped around, but again found only empty forest. Whatever was out there was staying just beyond the edge of sight, circling her with predatory patience. The rational part of her

mind whispered that it could be deer, or elk disturbed by her presence. But bears didn't hunt in coordinated pairs, and deer didn't move with such deliberate stealth.

Another branch snapped. Behind her this time.

Terror flooded her system, washing away all pretense of calm. Whatever was stalking her through these woods, she didn't want to meet it face to face.

She ran.

Thorns tore at her jacket like eager fingers. Branches whipped across her face, leaving lines of fire. Behind her, something crashed through the underbrush, not chasing but herding, driving her deeper into the green maze.

The ground betrayed her with every step, soft needles giving way to hidden roots, moss-slick stones, holes that seemed to open beneath her feet. Her breathing came in ragged gasps that burned, the too-thick air drowning her lungs.

Whatever it was, it was toying with her. The very idea sent fresh terror through her veins. Whatever pursued her could have caught her easily. This, she realized, was sport.

The toe of her sneaker caught in the curve of a root, sending her sprawling. Her palms scraped raw against bark, knee striking something sharp enough to tear through denim. She rolled, scrambling backward, expecting to see a bear or maybe a mountain lion preparing to attack.

But there was nothing.

Silence fell with crushing weight, her own harsh breathing was muffled, absorbed by trees that seemed to watch her. She pushed to her feet on shaking legs, turning in a slow circle.

Empty forest stretched endlessly in every direction, each tree identical to its neighbor. Waiting.

"Lost already, little thief?"

The voice poured through the silence, smooth and dark, laced with amusement. It came from everywhere and nowhere, rising from the earth itself.