



## CHAPTER ONE

There must come a moment in every girl's life when she looks back over her bevy of mistakes and ill-advised decisions and questions which it was that brought her to this. Surely, the feeling is universal. At least that's what Bryony assumed as she stood over the body of a young man racked with seizures—in full view of some fifty of her most devout followers—and wondered whether it might be kinder to just let the boy die.

How did she get here? What could she have done differently? Where exactly did she turn left when she was meant to go right?

The healing tent was thick with life—perspiration, tears, the electrified breath of those who sang Bryony's praises. The sick boy had been carried to the stage by his parents, laid across a stone altar assembled just for this purpose, and left to Bryony's tender ministrations. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years of age. His muscles tensed and twisted as his body reacted to a fever no one could break. His chest had been bared in anticipation of the healing touch of his god, or rather his parents' god if Bryony was honest. She had no idea whether the boy was a devotee of hers, though he probably was. Very few in the community rejected her. Why would they? All she ever did was heal them. And she asked nothing in return other than life's basic necessities

and a little love perhaps. She was as benevolent a god as she could be. Still . . .

How had it all come to this?

Bryony Moss wasn't born a god, and she hadn't set out to become one either. She'd been a quiet child with few friends and fewer acquaintances, content to play by herself in the little grove of plum trees behind her family's old farmhouse. She'd loved the spring when the grove would flower and rain pink confetti onto her hair and shoulders. She recalled being some version of happy, even with the background noise of fear and paranoia that permeated her world.

Then her mother got sick, followed by her little brother and her father. And like most people who found themselves in the grip of disease post-apocalypse, they quickly died.

It was easy to blame the angels. They'd taken so much, decades before Bryony was even born. Every guardian angel turned out to be somewhat less of a guardian than people had assumed. They were more like assassins, dutifully awaiting their orders, and when the orders came down, they were devastating. Every person of scientific learning—every doctor, chemist, biologist, and physicist—was exterminated. All media referencing such knowledge was destroyed upon discovery. Technological advancement came to a standstill as planned obsolescence quickly ate away at humanity's twenty-first century gains.

Mortals could no longer be trusted to rule themselves. War, corruption, and environmental destruction were evidence of that. So the angels generously offered to rule instead. Ignorance, being such a valuable tool for encouraging submission in notoriously rebellious creatures, was achieved in the most brutal, traumatic way possible. But what was the sacrifice of a few lives in the grand scheme of things? Surely the ends justified the means. Now there was no such thing as war, the environment was positively teeming with life, and no one ever questioned whether the sacrifice was necessary. No one dared.

Yes, it was easy to blame the angels, but honestly, it wasn't their fault. How many children had suffered the after-effects of the same

massacre, grown up in the same superstitious world, and yet hadn't become gods? They didn't all find themselves the heads of small but devout congregations. They didn't welcome worship the way Bryony did. So she couldn't hand all the responsibility for her choices to angels.

Perhaps it came down to the loss of her family. After all, that was the birth of her unusual relationship with death. When her little brother took sick, Bryony began wearing her dead mother's costume dresses around the house to amuse him. Her favorite was a beautiful, formal gown from a performance of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. For her brother's funeral, she dyed it black, and it felt like a second skin to her. So she dyed all her mother's old costume dresses black and wore them out like it was the fashion of the day.

She had watched everyone she loved suffer and suffer until death became a gentle relief, and she'd learned to be grateful for it. Life was a struggle, not just for survival but for meaning and identity. Death, instead, offered its assurance: *You belong here in my arms, in the earth, in the wind and sea. Your meaning is rest, and quiet, and new life. You are the grass, the trees, and little, scurrying feet.*

Bryony frequently visited the graveyard where her family was buried. She felt at home among the crumbling headstones and marble monuments. She was a ghost among ghosts, a citizen of their country. She spoke their language, heard their music, read their poetry. It wasn't that she was anxious to die. She just knew one day she would, and she was perfectly comfortable with the idea. If life was an exhausting journey abroad, death was the creaking front door of her childhood home.

It had been the loss of her first family that led Bryony to seek out a second one in the graveyard. And the graveyard had provided.

"Please, Mistress." A quiet voice from the congregation brought her back to the present. It was a woman in the front row. The boy's mother? Grandmother? "Please, save him."

Bryony tilted her head and squinted at the woman. The black veil she always wore obscured her vision a little, but it was worth the anonymity it provided. No one could see her face, her questions, her doubt. She

performed miracles dressed as a shadow, and no one ever bothered her outside the tent.

She glanced down at the boy on the stone slab, his body only just quieted from his most recent seizure. He panted and wheezed, sweating and tossing in abject misery. Bryony pinched her lips closed and twisted the ring she wore on the middle finger of her left hand. "But . . . is that what he wants?"

The woman in the front row frowned, her brow furrowed in confusion. "Mistress, he is dying."

"I know." Bryony was surprising herself. She didn't usually address her congregation. She preferred to play her part quietly, soak up the love and gratitude offered in exchange for healing, and then retreat. It felt wonderful, receiving that love, but was it right? Why did she try so hard to convince herself she was worthy? Something in her protested too much.

If only she could ask Shakespeare. He would have a reasonable answer like he always did. She imagined him standing before her now, cocking his black head, wiping his beak on the body of the boy, irreverent as always. Of course, irreverent was all he would ever be. He was a bird, a crow to be precise, and he neither knew nor acknowledged any god but himself.

*Just heal the boy, Shakespeare would say. Get on with it, so we can eat.*

*But what if he prefers to die?* she would ask.

And Shakespeare would pause his grooming long enough to say, *He can kill himself later if he wants.*

*But suicide is forbidden.*

And Shakespeare would shake his head at her. *If he doesn't want to take matters into his own hands, he can go insult an angel, and they'll happily oblige him. Just heal the boy, Bryony. Appease your followers, and let's get dinner.*

"I will heal him," Bryony said aloud. Her congregation responded with a collective sigh of relief. The woman in the front row burst into

grateful tears, and behind the stone altar, Bryony turned her ring again. It was an unusual piece. A silver hummingbird's skull was mounted where a gemstone would normally be. Bryony never took it off.

The boy on the table shifted, and Bryony leaned over his body. She laid her head on his chest and listened to his slowing heartbeat through her veil. If she did nothing, he would die within hours. Death might have been exactly what he wanted, but she had no way of asking him.

She began to hum, a misdirection in anticipation of a little sleight of hand. She murmured a chant and placed both her palms on the boy's chest. Everything happened under her veil. Those watching saw a mere shadow of her movements. No one noticed the way she curled her left hand into a fist and scratched the surface of the boy's skin with the beak of her ring. It was nothing, the pinprick of a kitten's claw. The mark would heal before anyone even noticed it was there.

And already the boy's heartbeat was strengthened, his color returned. Already his breath became measured, and he sank into the comfort of true rest, his infection eradicated, his fever broken.

Bryony straightened and lifted her gaze to heaven. She held out her hands and spread her fingers as if releasing the illness into the ether. Then she announced, "He is well."

The crowd erupted. His mother wept. Bryony's devotees began to sing a ballad of her praises. She bowed like a performer, a circus magician—which was what she was, really—and backed out of the tent.



The ring was the trick, the lie, the con. The congregation believed that Bryony herself had the power to heal, that she laid her hands on the bodies of the sick and her holy touch drove the illness from them. It wasn't true at all.

Wherever she went, Bryony wore her little treasure. She'd found it ten years ago, the same day she met Shakespeare. He'd been standing over

it in a graveyard—though it didn't look like a ring at the time—not far from her family's burial plots. He'd pecked at the ground as if to say, *Look at this. Isn't it something?*

Innocent curiosity led her to this. That's what was to blame in the end. Well, that and her ridiculous desire for a fairy-tale life. She'd been nourished on her own fantasies, and she half believed they were possible. The idea of a crow in a graveyard leading her to a fated, magical item was irresistible. So, even though it was stupid, impossible, childish, she heeded the crow.

As she approached, the bird retreated. It flew onto an adjacent, crumbling, stone angel and cawed three times in an almost comical display of displeasure. Bryony chuckled, but her eye was immediately drawn to the item the crow had been plucking at. It was silver, half buried, yet it gleamed as though it had just been polished. She brushed the earth and dead leaves away from what appeared to be a kind of sword hilt. Two serpents with emerald eyes wound their way up the handle, through which she could easily slip her hand, and she did.

The crow shook the dust from its feathers, and Bryony laughed at herself even as she daydreamed about a young King Arthur, pulling his prophetic sword from the stone. It figured hers would be buried in a graveyard. As she lifted the hilt, she felt the weight of the weapon. It was heavier than she expected, but it felt good in her hand. This was no actor's prop. It was beautiful. Even on such an overcast day, it caught and reflected the light like a diamond.

She considered keeping it. It made no sense to bury it again. And she was drawn to the idea that some cosmic power or other had just handed her an extraordinary destiny. The second she made her decision, the sword began to transform in her hands. It shrank and twisted as though the metal were being re-forged in an invisible fire. She almost dropped the object—it no longer resembled a sword—but she couldn't bear the thought of giving up her new, fairy-tale life.

In the smoothest of shifts, the sword in her hand became a ring. Where the bulk of it had gone, Bryony couldn't say. It was small,

delicate, and perfectly suited to her. The band was scaled, reminiscent of the serpents that once made up the hilt of the sword. But instead of the emerald eyes of a snake, the defining feature of the new object was the skull of a hummingbird. It was tiny and had a long, silver beak. Bryony hesitated only a moment before slipping it onto the middle finger of her left hand. She wore the beak pointed toward the tip of her finger and found that it barely extended past her knuckle. It was perfect, as though it had been made for her.

“Very attractive,” a voice commented.

Bryony jumped. Someone was watching. She gulped and looked around, but no one was there.

“It suits you, I mean,” said whoever it was. It was a masculine voice but soft and airy. “They always reshape themselves to suit those who keep them—the swords. And you’ve given this one an attractive form.”

No, there was no denying it now. The speaker was definitely the only other living thing in the graveyard. The crow.

Bryony’s first thought was that she had somehow gone afoul of a lesser angel, and it had chosen this pretense as a kind of lesson or test. She glanced down at the ring and back up again, fighting a powerful urge to scream and run. *Never show an angel you’re afraid*, she reminded herself. Angels hated fear almost as much as they hated indifference. “Is it yours?”

The crow cocked its head and lifted its wings in an awkward kind of shrug. “I had thought to use it in a nest if it became small enough when I took it, but I couldn’t seem to get it out of the ground. It glitters nicely, don’t you think?”

Bryony agreed. “Do you still want it?” she asked, secretly hoping the answer was no but resolving to return the ring if the crow requested it. If this was a test, Bryony was not going to fail.

But the crow shook its head and blinked its beady, black eyes. “I’d rather see what else it can do.”

“Aside from changing shape, you mean?”

“I mean aside from giving me the power of speech. They all change shape.”

Bryony held her hand out in front of her and spread her fingers wide, examining the ring. So this trinket had somehow given a crow the power of human speech. The bird was not an angel after all. “Who did it belong to?” she wondered aloud.

The crow answered, “Whichever angel could commune with beasts, I assume. But he has either abandoned his sword intentionally or been killed. Now it belongs to you.”

“Angels can’t be killed.” Bryony let her hand fall back to her side. “Everyone knows that.”

The crow chuckled at her and hopped closer, speaking in a low, conspiratorial tone. “They can indeed. You just need the right weapon.”

So Bryony kept the sword that was now a ring. And she kept her crow companion too, whom she named Shakespeare, and whom she allowed to accompany her almost everywhere. But he never came into the healing tent, and Bryony still wasn’t sure why.