

KAITLIN HILLERICH

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SAVAGE
BONES

a novella



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*We came here only to sleep—
Only to dream.
It is not true that we have come to live upon the earth.*

-Unknown Aztec Poet

CHAPTER 1

The dead danced in the streets of Morelia as the sun withered in a sky the color of spilled wine. Esperanza walked among the cavorting skeletons, a trail of marigolds thick and soft beneath her feet. The orange petals had been scattered over the cobbles to guide the wandering spirits while they sought those they had left behind. A shiver swept across her skin despite the day's heat lingering on the November air. The skeleton was watching her again.

Candlelight and shadow shifted over the faces surrounding her, many of them masquerading as *calaveras*. The skull masks were painted with dahlias, poppies, and sprawling flourishes in vibrant hues that ranged from fuchsia to the fluorescent green of a parakeet's breast. Their teeth were bared in wide, comical grins as though death were nothing more than an amusement. One mask, however, stood apart from the rest.

Sapphire-blue poppies rimmed the pits of the calavera's eyes, elegant lines curving from their inner corners to unfurl across the tops of its cheekbones. Petals cascaded from the twin flourishes like tears, contradicting the grinning mouth in a way that made the hair on the back of Esperanza's neck prickle.

"Are you all right?"

Her uncle's voice beside her wrenched her attention from the mask, and she realized she was digging her fingers into his arm. Forcing them to relax, she summoned a smile. "Of course, Tío."

She stole a glance back into the crowd but the calavera had vanished. Surely she hadn't imagined him watching her? Twice, now, she had turned to find him standing there. The same one, she was sure of it. Her ears throbbed with the music swelling

through the city to welcome the visiting spirits and she rubbed at them distractedly. If only it would be quiet for a moment so she could *think*...

Esperanza's eyes roamed among the brightly painted calavera masks of those celebrating the reunion between the living and the dead. Tonight during Día de los Inocentes, the souls of departed children would return to their families, while the other souls would follow tomorrow during Día de los Muertos. The festival was rooted in ancient tradition that had begun with the Aztec people long before the invasion of the Spanish conquistadors. The Aztecs had believed life to be nothing more than a dream, and that only in death did one truly wake. Perhaps tonight she had been dreaming after all.

Miguel took her fidgeting hand in his. "Ah, I know that look. Which of the world's mysteries are you trying to solve now?"

Shaking away the chill clinging to her skin, Esperanza forced her lips into a smile. "I was just wondering how the unconscious mind creates dreams. If a dream can feel so real, then how can we trust our senses aren't creating an illusion right now?"

Miguel chuckled. "You always seem to ask questions I had never even considered, sobrina."

She pretended to adjust the marigolds tucked into her ebony hair to hide her faltering smile. Sometimes she wished she could see the world as it was without wondering at the inner workings of everything within it.

A familiar ache sprang upon her heart, sinking in deep like the claws of a jaguar. Her mother and grandmother would much prefer she learn the skills of a dutiful wife rather than how to build a camera obscura or chart the movements of the stars. Tethering herself to a husband who would scorn her for daring to think and ask questions about the world was the last thing Esperanza intended to do, however. Her mind was as keen as any man's—more so even than most—and she would not allow any man to stifle her thoughts.

While her family disparaged her curious nature, Miguel had always encouraged her to study, to ask questions, to share her opinions in a world that expected women to remain silent. Ever since Esperanza had been a child she had anticipated visiting him in Morelia every year, and their visits never lasted long enough. Miguel was the only one

who seemed to believe she was capable of so much more than the role society deemed she confine herself to.

They continued along the street dotted with vendors selling tamales, chalupas, and enchiladas. Beneath the biting, spicy scent of chipotles and roasting meat drifted the cloying sweetness of candied pumpkin, sugar skulls, and *pan de muerto*—bread of the dead. The shriek of a child pierced the tumult of voices like a parrot’s screech. Esperanza winced. She stepped aside to avoid a stray dog weaving through the tangle of legs, sniffing for discarded scraps, and bumped into a man wearing a poncho woven in a dizzying geometric pattern of red, purple, and gold that made her eyes ache. She turned her gaze skyward to avoid his scowl.

Her muscles bunched into knots at the assault of smells, sounds, and shoving bodies upon her senses. If only she were curled up in the quiet of her room with her copy of *The Annual of Scientific Discovery*.

A bat darted across the stars in erratic movements, drawing her eye. She studied the wild fluttering of its wings and attempted to calculate the frequency of wingbeats per second. But then what would be its flight velocity? Her brow furrowed as she mused over wing amplitude and body mass. If its mass were—

“Ah, there is Luciana and Isadora!”

Her uncle’s voice chased the numbers from her mind and she lowered her gaze to find they had reached the plaza. Colorful banners of *papel picado* cut into elaborate designs stretched between the adobe buildings. In the center stood a fountain, each of its tiered basins brimming with orange marigolds and its bottom ledge ringed with a thousand candles. Dancers filled the plaza, skirts of taffeta and chiffon swirling like petals caught in the wind as heeled shoes clattered against the flagstone in rhythm to the music.

Esperanza spotted her mother and grandmother near the edge of the plaza among a cluster of women she recognized from Miguel’s recent banquet. Heat touched her cheeks at the memory of that night. She had rambled on about the mechanics of steam engines when the women had politely tried to include her in conversation. They had excused themselves soon after, and probably thought she hadn’t noticed the smirks they had exchanged behind their lace fans, or heard their whispers accompanied by titters of laughter.

Esperanza turned away quickly, in no hurry to join them. “Do you see Papá?” The ruffled hem of her red dress bounced around her ankles as she rose up onto her toes to peer through the crowd.

Miguel hesitated, a pitying look in his eyes. One she had come to know too well.

Esperanza sank back onto her heels. “He’s not coming.”

She folded her arms around her chest as though she could stop her heart from crumpling. Of course he wasn’t coming. Why had she thought he would keep his promise this time? He was probably spending the night at the *cantina* with a bottle of tequila. She tilted back her head to glare at the banners swaying in the breeze. Why did she always believe him?

“I’m sure whatever is detaining your father must be important.” Miguel fiddled with the silk cravat around his neck as he always did when he was lying.

She snorted. Everything was of greater importance to Eduardo than his own daughter.

Her uncle gave a heavy sigh. “I know my brother is a difficult man, but he does love you, Esperanza.”

She choked down a bitter laugh. Love? She didn’t feel loved. She felt—

Her gaze snagged on a mask in the crowd and a shiver slid down the length of her spine. Leering back at her was the calavera with empty eyes weeping tears of sapphire-blue petals. Certainly she wasn’t imagining his stare this time. Who was he, and why was he following her?

The distant howl of a dog drifted across the plaza and the calavera tilted its head as though listening to its mournful song. Her grandmother said dogs howled when death was near. Miguel had always scoffed at this, but Esperanza thought it made sense since according to Aztec legend it was dogs that guided spirits to the underworld.

“Esperanza?”

She started at her uncle’s voice. “Sorry, I thought...” Her eyes darted back to the calavera, but it had vanished. Perhaps it was a visiting spirit, after all. She shook her head and tried to smile despite the sensation that she was still being watched. “Never mind, it was nothing.”

Miguel leaned closer, a conspiratorial gleam in his eyes. “If you’re feeling unwell we could slip away. I think we would both much rather spend the evening discussing

electromagnetic theory over a cup of hot chocolate than endure endless small talk with strangers.”

Esperanza hesitated, caught between the temptation to leave and the desire to abandon herself to the spirited strumming of the guitar. As much as she detested social events, their one redeeming quality was the dancing. Ever since she was a little girl words had always felt cumbersome on her clumsy tongue, but dance was the one time she could express the breathings of her heart with eloquent grace. Her mother had taught her the language of dance, and it was one of the few things they had in common.

She blew out a sigh. “All right, but we must have at least one dance before we go.”

“Only one?” Miguel lifted a teasing brow.

“Maybe two.” Grinning, she grabbed his hand and began to drag him towards the center of the plaza.

“Esperanza!” Her grandmother’s shrill voice rose above the din of the crowd, halting her in her tracks.

So much for their grand escape.

Isadora Rivera descended upon them, squeezing past a pair of gentlemen in coattails to grasp her granddaughter’s arm. She was a short, round woman, always bustling with energy like a hummingbird. Her eyes were alight with an eagerness that made Esperanza wary. “There you are! You won’t believe who I’ve found—I’m sure you must remember Don Alejandro?”

Esperanza’s gaze shifted to the young man standing behind her grandmother and the breath was immediately wrenched from her lungs. It couldn’t be him. Please, anyone but him. The man’s umber eyes found hers and she flinched back as though she had been struck.

Everything about him was painfully familiar; his poor attempts to comb back his unruly waves of dark hair, the expressive arch to his thick brows, the scruff of a beard along his jaw. Her mouth went dry. He couldn’t be here. How many times had she prayed she would never set eyes on him again? Yet here he stood before her, her fiancé.

Or rather, he had been, once, though no one had known of their engagement. But that had been years ago, during a time better left forgotten. Now the love she had once held for the man who had devastated her heart had become her darkest secret, her greatest regret.

Alejandro took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips. "It's a pleasure to see you again, señorita."

His touch woke her from her stupor and she nearly ripped her hand from his grasp. How dare he even look at her after what he had done? Her hands twitched with the urge to shove him away. Instead, she fixed him with a polite smile that made her face ache.

"I trust you've been well, Don Valladares?" Esperanza forced every ounce of cold formality into her voice she could muster.

Alejandro eyed her cautiously, as though he had just stumbled across a rattlesnake coiled in his path. "Well enough, señorita."

Miguel clapped him on the shoulder. "It's been too long, Alejandro. I didn't know you had returned to Morelia."

"Only just recently. I'm afraid I haven't had much time for social engagements." Though his words were directed at her uncle, his eyes lingered on Esperanza.

She bristled but refused to lower her gaze. What sort of game was he playing? He had avoided his home for years, and now all of a sudden he decided to return? Why?

Her grandmother *tsked*. "It's not good for a young man to spend so much time alone." She paused emphatically. "Unless you've found a wife?"

Esperanza's heart knotted and she took a sudden interest in the band across the plaza.

Alejandro's head snapped to Isadora, the slight lift in his otherwise smooth brows revealing the question had startled him. "No, señora, I'm afraid my travels have allowed little time for courting."

Esperanza's heart eased.

"Such a shame!" Though Isadora's tone was sympathetic, the glint in her eyes betrayed her delight at this news. "Esperanza, too, is unattached. It's been far too long since we've had any suitors come to call."

The hint of a smile appeared in the corner of Alejandro's mouth. "I find that difficult to believe, with wit such as hers."

Was he mocking her? She raised her chin like a viper rearing back to strike. "Most men prefer beauty to wit."

"Most men are fools. I've always found a woman's mind and character to reveal more of her beauty than a painted face."

“And I’ve always found men who speak charm and flattery to be less trustworthy than men who are fools.”

Alejandro cocked his head, seeming unaffected by the venom in her words. “Perhaps you mistake my honesty for flattery, señorita.”

Isadora’s grip tightened upon her granddaughter’s arm. “*Esperanza.*”

She ignored the sharp warning in her tone as she glared at Alejandro, who merely smiled back politely. He had always been better at playing this game. But she was tired of playing, tired of pretending this was some happy reunion between old friends, tired of wearing this smile like the dancers around her wore their grinning masks. She could not bear the lie a moment longer.

Miguel’s gaze shifted from her to Alejandro, a crease forming between his brows. “Isadora, perhaps *Esperanza* and Don Alejandro would like a moment to become reacquainted.” Her grandmother opened her mouth as though to protest, but Miguel was already speaking. “It was good to see you again, Alejandro. *Permiso.*” He deftly steered Isadora across the plaza, leaving the two of them alone.

Alejandro’s drawn shoulders eased and his careful smile melted away to reveal something raw, like unwrapping a bandage from a wound. “When I first saw you in the crowd I thought my eyes must be deceiving me. But it really is you.” He reached out as though to take her hand. “*Esperanza.*”

She drew back. “Please, señor.” It was hard enough to look at him, much less touch him. Her skin still seared from the brush of his lips. Had he returned simply to torment her?

Alejandro’s hand fell to his side. “Forgive me, I forget myself.” The smooth cadence of his voice had turned ragged. “I wouldn’t have approached you at all had your grandmother not recognized me.”

Esperanza’s chest constricted until she could hardly breathe. A thousand questions swarmed through her head, but her tongue couldn’t seem to capture a single one. The urge to run tingled through her heavy legs. How far could she get before he tried to stop her? The band struck up a new song and the sweeping melody of a horn and violin filled the plaza, accompanied by the energetic clacking of the dancer’s shoes.

Alejandro’s expression softened. “This used to be your favorite.”

“It still is.” She eyed him warily. He remembered?

“Would you honor me with a dance, Esperanza?” He held out his hand to her, but she did not take it.

Every memory she had spent the past three years trying to forget pricked at her heart like the stinging needles of a cactus, sinking in so deep they became embedded. Did he think he could pretend as though nothing had ever happened? Did he think she had forgotten? Esperanza curled her hands into fists to still their trembling. She could do neither.

“Where have you been all these years?” she asked.

Alejandro flinched at the anger lurking within her words like a sheathed blade. “Mexico City, for a while, then Veracruz, and Campeche and a dozen other towns in-between whose names I can’t even remember.” His eyes dropped to his polished boots. “For a long time I couldn’t bear the thought of returning home. Not after—after what happened.”

What happened. Even now he still couldn’t speak of his parents’ deaths. She turned her head away, a breeze catching a stray lock of her hair. She and Alejandro had never intended their engagement to be a secret forever; just until he could convince his father to end the marriage arrangement he had made for his son since birth.

That had been their plan, anyway. But after Alejandro’s parents were murdered everything had changed. *He* had changed.

Esperanza’s heart hitched in her chest. “Did they ever find the man who did it?”

“No.” His voice caught on the word and when he lifted his head a shadow of agony haunted his eyes.

She shoved away the sympathy encroaching upon her heart. There was still no excuse for what he had done. “So you decided to run away from everything, from all of your problems, from—” *Me.* She bit down on her tongue.

“There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t regret the way things ended between us—”

“You mean the way *you* ended them?” He made it sound like it had been some natural occurrence beyond his control, like the rising of the tide or the pull of gravity, as though it hadn’t been set into motion by his own hand. All of the pain she had kept buried for so long surged to the surface, intent on destroying everything in its path. “I

wrote to you for months, Alejandro. *Months*. And you never replied, not a single letter. I had no idea what had become of you, or if you were even—”

She turned her head away, drawing in a shaky breath. She had lost count of how many nights she had lain awake, fearing he was dead. “When you finally wrote, it was to tell me you weren’t coming back, that our engagement was over. Perhaps I could have understood had you at least offered an explanation, but you extended no such courtesy. I never knew how cruel you were until that moment.”

Alejandro’s shoulders caved inward as though he couldn’t bear the weight of her words, anguish churning within his eyes. He began to reach for her hand and then stopped himself. “Please, forgive me.”

“No,” she whispered breathlessly, her eyes burning with restrained tears. She couldn’t let go of the pain he had caused her, or the anger that filled the cavity in her heart where her love for him had once been. She didn’t know how. “I don’t want your apologies. After tonight, I never want to see you again.”

“Esperanza, at least let me explain—”

“Goodnight, Don Valladares.”

She lifted her skirts and brushed past him, praying he wouldn’t follow. He never should have approached her. Had he thought she would weep for joy when she saw him, that she would fall into his arms and welcome him back into her life? Her fingers crushed the silk fabric of her dress. She had stopped loving Alejandro Valladares a long time ago, just as she had stopped waiting for him. She was no fool; she had suffered disappoint enough times to learn the greatest mistake a woman could make was to waste her life waiting on the whims of men instead of living out her own desires.

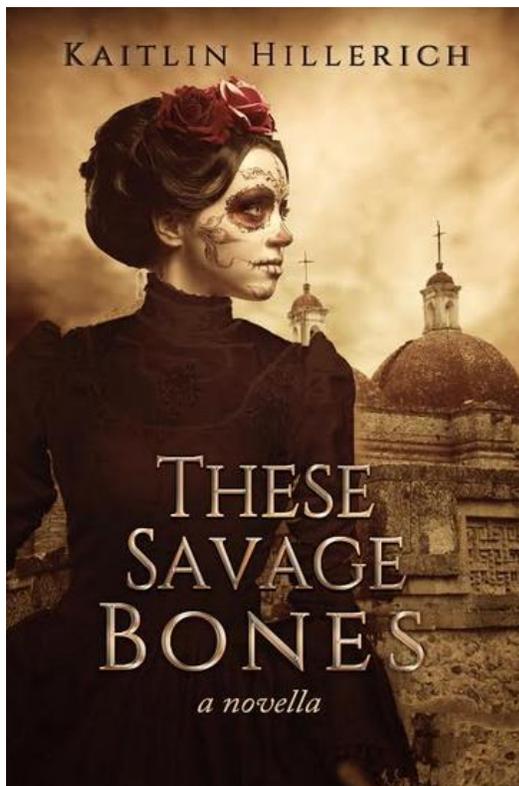
The noise of the festival had become abrasive to her ears and a dull ache was growing in her head. She wanted to leave. Now. Esperanza spotted her uncle sequestered away in an empty corner across the plaza and hurried towards him, eager to put as much distance between her and Alejandro as possible.

A man broke away from the crowd to approach Miguel and her steps faltered. It was the man in the calavera mask, its eye sockets blossoming with blue poppies. Did her uncle know him? There was something predatory about the way he prowled toward Miguel, and it sent a prickle of warning down the back of her neck.

She doubled her pace, jostling against the crowd and leaving irritated murmurs in her wake. Something felt wrong about this man. Very wrong. Miguel took no notice of his approach, his gaze turned toward the dancers spinning across the plaza. The stranger's hand slid into his frock coat and he withdrew an object that flashed silver in the candlelight. Esperanza's eyes widened. She shouted a warning, but the lively notes of the horn swallowed her cry.

The man lunged forward and thrust the knife deep into her uncle's heart.

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