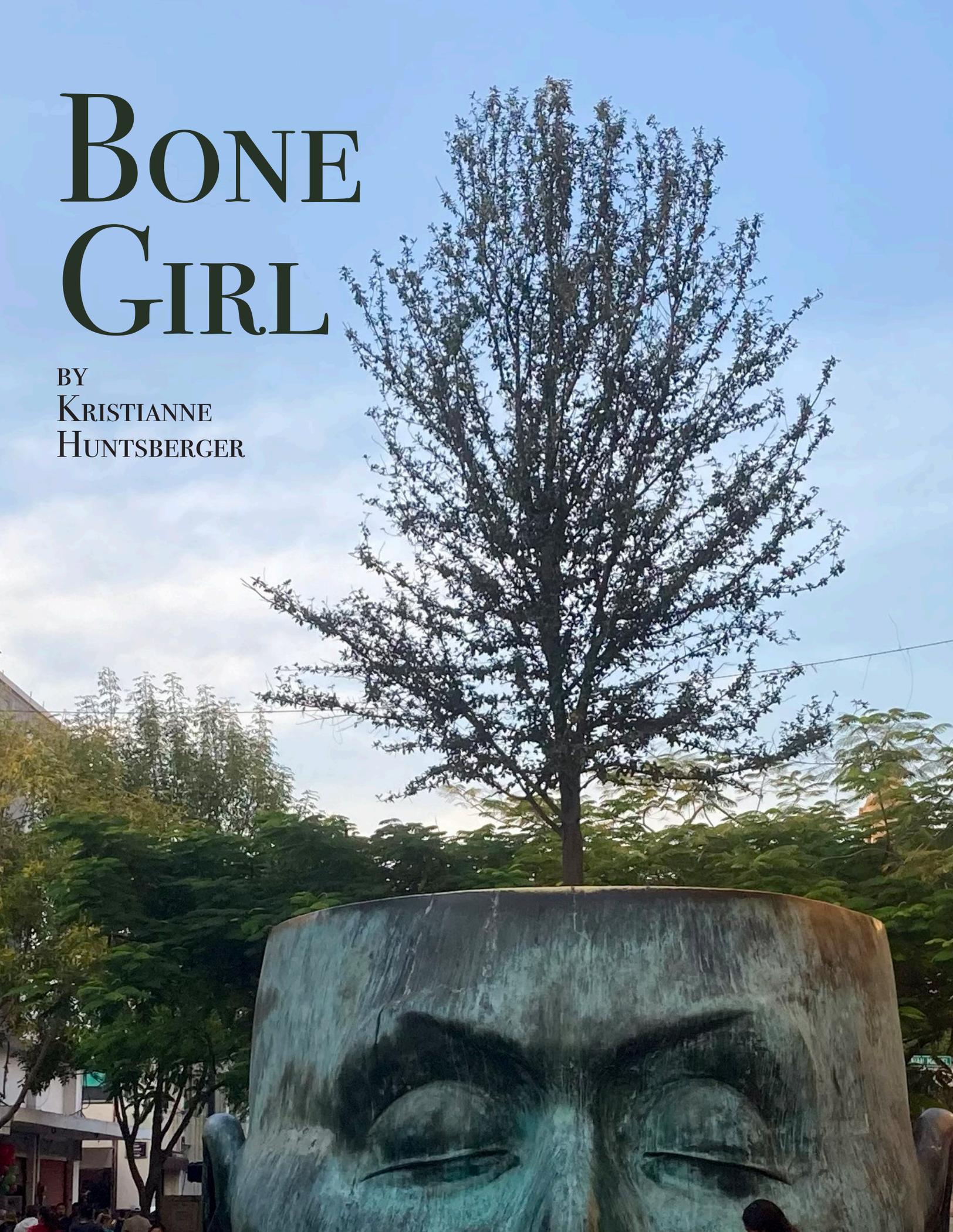


# BONE GIRL

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## ONCE UPON A TIME,

long ago and far away, bone girl lived with the other bone people deep under the earth where the stones were smooth and cool. She heard the stories the bone people told about the world on the surface: the bright, sharp air, the lonely emptiness of the concrete cliffs and caverns. The bone people had been shown this hiding place where they could huddle away and live happily. They did small things and told small stories and avoided the world above.

Bone Girl asked questions about the other world. Were there people there like the bone people? Were there others? And were there new stories she could hear?

“Why would you ask these things?” The bone people asked. “We live a happy life here where we are safe.”

But Bone Girl couldn't stop her curiosity. It grew even larger when she found the stone. It was the smoothest, roundest bit of quartz she'd ever felt. She loved the feeling of the little round rock, and

she polished it and smoothed out all its fine cracks with grease. When she lifted the stone up to blow wet breath on the surface, she noticed something strange. A cool, pale spot appeared before her in the usual darkness that surrounded the bone people deep underground.

She brought the round rock close to the left socket of her skull and pressed it into the open spot and suddenly she could see the dark walls of the cave around her and the faint, shadowy shapes of the bone people's pale skeletons. The amazement coursed through her and rattled her ribs and knees. She scrambled across

the cave, searching out more smooth, round spheres of quartz that she could shine up and polish. A pair for everyone.

“But why?” the bone people asked. “We never needed these things before. We were placed in this safe cave without your polished stones, and we have always been content.”

Why wasn't Bone Girl also content?

With her new pair of eyes, Bone Girl grew tired of the few shadowy things available to see in the dark home underground. She climbed out through the



twists and turns of the cave, through the soil, the bits of glinting mica and the russet threads of sandstone out onto the surface.

All the frightened tales she'd heard had prepared Bone Girl for a shattered and dangerous space, but she was willing to peek out because she was so hungry for new things to see.

Bone Girl found tall, emerald trees and wide silvery bushes tipped with flecks of golden blossoms. She found copper colored deer grazing and marble-furred bunnies with fluffy tails. There were birds in every color—some with flashy sapphire feathers making twee da dee chirps and some slick as obsidian with deep frog croak calls.

There were so many more sounds than the rusty jointed clatter clack of the bone people underground. The different voices of the birds wound together with the tumbling ripple of water and of tree limbs sloughing up the wind. There were calls from sandy colored coyotes and the chitter clicks of squirrels.

The bone people were horrified to learn that Bone Girl had climbed up to the surface. “We were intended to stay here, safe from all those things, don't bring them here with you!” They cried and clasped their bony

hands over their ears. BONE GIRL BEGAN TO SPEND MORE TIME ABOVE, learning about all the plants and animals. She noticed how smooth and fluid the deer

and the rabbits' movements were. She thought of how she rattled and crackled brittlely as she swayed from place to place. She watched the other animals' round muscles ripple as they walked and longed for that ease. She gathered good tawny clay from a place where water seeped from the stones and that night, she formed subtle muscles for her arms and legs, her torso and her throat and face.

The other bone people tisked and whispered at a distance from Bone Girl. "It is unnatural," they hissed. "We were meant to rattle and clack."

But Bone Girl's new muscles not only softened the noisy movement of her bones, but they also soothed the sore grating of her joints and allowed her to move further out into the world to see what she could learn.

As she studied the glinting scales of the fish in the rolling streams and all the zippered plumes and quills of the birds, the smooth furred flank of the deer and the slick skins of the snake and the gecko she realized she would not have to smooth over her clay muscles with water and patch them with fresh soil each evening if she too had a skin.

Bone Girl gathered the best fallen leaves in russet red, ebony, and golden shades of sunset, soaked them in the stream and used a twig needle threaded with moss to stitch herself a skin. She wove silvered pine needles and sage bracts into hair and knew that she was beautiful.

Underground, the bone people had decided they'd seen enough of all Bone Girl's disrespect. They spoke with a cool distance whenever she was near. "When you decide to be through with all this nonsense," the bone people said, "we will be happy to include you again."

The cave that had once been her home felt even colder to Bone Girl. The walls were damper than they'd ever been. The floor was harder and the air more stale and lonely than she'd ever realized.

She spent all the time she could above learning about the world. When the days began to grow shorter and a chill wind threaded the air, Bone Girl noticed that the deer gathered together and headed off toward the south. The birds too began to form bright triangles in the air and flapped off southward together. She hadn't seen bunnies or snakes out foraging for days and the fish appeared to have left the creeks that ran past the cave entrance.

Bone Girl stood among the gray barked trees that cast red and yellow leaves to the ground around her feet. She looked up again at the arrows of the birds moving south against the building clouds and thought of the dark, stale space in the cave where bone people huddled together and rattled and griped. Rather than return to that dark place, she stepped forward onto the path headed south. She would walk on as far as she could and see what else there was to learn. ○