

The Bones of the Forest

By Rachelle Reese

Late July - not sure of the date and can't look at my calendar

I was angry when the power went off at quarter after four. I'm anxious to be finished and rejoin the world I exiled myself from three months ago so I could finish this novel. The novel is close - so close I can taste the closing words on my tongue. Bittersweet, the way I like them.

Amanda flipped through the pages of the red leather-bound journal, looking for a name, a year. She found nothing. She had found the book and two nice ink pens under a floorboard in the crumbling house near the edge of the property her parents had bought last year. Her father had gotten a job in the mines nearby and they were hoping for a fresh start away from the addicted city. That was what her father called all cities. He had been raised in the country and hated the traffic and the rude neighbors honking their horns and then smiling their fake smiles at each other over four-foot fences. Hated the identical houses that stretched endlessly side-by-side with exactly twenty feet between them. Hated the mind-numbing, vitamin water that flowed from every drinking water tap. So when scientists discovered that the tuff rock in the Undiscovered Foothills could be ground and processed to create an anti-anxiety medicine, her father was one of the first to sign up.

Amanda's mother had not been happy. "You know you're a hypocrite, don't you? You know they'll put that medicine you're mining right into the water."

"I'll be mining it, not drinking it," her father had replied. "They'll do what they want with or without me. I plan to build a house with a well."

And so their arguments went. But in the end, her father got the job, they bought ten acres of land, and, five weeks ago, they moved in.

They had lived in the new house just over a month when Amanda discovered the crumbling house. "Why do they call it the Undiscovered Foothills if people lived here before?" Amanda had asked at dinner that night.

"People never lived here, Amanda," her mother had said. "Not in my lifetime."

"They did live here once though. I found a house."

Her mother had become visibly nervous. "Don't go near it. Terrorists might have lived there. There might be bombs, chemicals, and who knows what else." She'd glared at Amanda's father. "I told you it was a bad idea to move outside of civilization."

Her father had shrugged, "It's probably harmless, Julie. There were lots of people who lived in rural areas before the terrorist attacks. And most of them were just normal people."

"Still."

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Amanda had learned that it was sometimes easier to just go along with her mother’s worries than to argue with her, especially since they’d moved. “I won’t go back there. It’s too long a walk, anyway.”

Of course, Amanda had gone back. There was nothing better to do. She had three more weeks before she could enroll in school. That was the rule when you moved out of the safety net – seven weeks of quarantine. It was the same way going back inside. That’s why most people who lived in the cities never left. Who could stand sitting at home and doing nothing for seven weeks?

So Amanda had spent most of last week exploring the house. From what she could tell, a woman had lived there alone. The clothing was mostly rotted away, but she could tell it was old by the style. Pre-terrorist more than likely, maybe even older than that. There were stacks of books, but most of them were too moldy to read. There were dishes stacked in cupboards and piled in an old-style sink. There were even a few old cans of food. Amanda could barely make out the expiration dates, but she was pretty sure they had all expired before she was born.

She had noticed the loose floorboard yesterday and it had bothered her all night. Her imagination ran wild. It could be just a loose floorboard or it could be a passageway to a secret world or a tomb. Or a room full of bombs, her mother’s voice interrupted her daydream. Amanda pushed it aside. After all, her father had come from outside the city and he wasn’t a terrorist. So first thing in the morning, Amanda had taken the crowbar from her father’s toolbox and gone back to the house.

And now she had a book and two very old pens. At first she’d been disappointed, but then she’d realized that the book might help her solve the mystery of who had lived in the crumbling house and what had happened to her.