

Brimstone

by shosier

Amanda Ryder never asked for her special ESP gifts--only her family never believed her innocence. Now, her virginity just became a matter of life and death. Winner, Desert Rose RWA's "Realizing the Dream" contest for 2012.

Chapter 1

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The following is an excerpt from my new release, **Brimstone**. For more information and purchasing links, please visit my website www.shanyhosier.com

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Amanda tore across the frozen ground of the cornstalk stubble-filled field. Her lungs ached from the frigid air. The blunt force of the cold struck her face like an open palm, the sting of it bringing tears to her eyes.

She risked a glance over her shoulder, paranoid he might send her brother after her. There was always a chance her father might change his mind...and she was committed to her course now. She would never go back. No matter what.

A few yards further, then the welcoming obscurity of the forest embraced her. The ground was more even here, less treacherous to her ankles. She relaxed slightly, comforted by the shroud of thick trunks and leafless, interwoven branches the woods generously provided.

She slowed her pace to a jog, then a quick walk. The bare skin of her legs burned from the cold air whipping up under her skirt, and her knees stung, oozing blood. Yanking up her socks didn't help. She wrapped her arms tightly around her body to conserve what little heat she'd produced.

She halted, scanning the woods, listening for any sound of pursuit. Hearing nothing, she forged ahead like a hunted animal, frequently pausing to listen and pay closer attention to landmarks. The shrub in front of an oak told her she was too far west, and she adjusted her heading. When she came upon the familiar wild grapevine wound around a locust tree, a thin veneer of relief spread over the barely controlled panic within her. She was getting close now.

Finally, she arrived at the right place. Triangulated between an odd assembly of three walnut trees was a little clearing, naturally kept bare by the tannins of the fallen hulls. She scanned the ground, attempting to winnow out a hint, any clue as to the treasure hidden there.

Amanda breathed in satisfaction. Without a metal detector, no one would ever know what was here unless they'd witnessed her hiding it.

Her satisfaction was short-lived...cut off by a sense of urgency. She took a deep breath and half-closed her eyes. Unfolding her tightly knotted body, she spread her arms and hands open, palms facing the ground. Her attention properly adjusted, the item she searched for began to glow weakly yet distinctly from below the soil. A faint ripple in the air above signaled a tiny disturbance in the magnetic field.

She closed her eyes, fully redirecting her focus. *Rise. Come.*

The little object obeyed her commands. Wiggling, shimmying, bucking against the foot of soil above it, a small metal can worked its way to the surface. The earth did what it could to ease its passage, cooperatively mounding itself to one side. Liberated at last, the can zoomed toward her outstretched hands.

She wrenched it open, wincing slightly as her tender wrists protested. She dug out the small wad of money within and shoved it deep into her pocket. Without bothering to replace the soil in the hole or hide the evidence in any way, she dropped the can and its lid, spun on her heels, and ran off.

Her breath coming hard, she ran along the stream toward what she prayed would prove as friendly a refuge as it had in the past. While her feet rhythmically hit the ground, her mind worked frantically, planning what to do next. Then making alternate plans. Then more back-ups to those, in case they fell through. She was on a wire, and one false step could ruin everything.

She expected it to come to this eventually. It was inevitable, really. She'd even looked forward to it, in a way. Only it hadn't happened as she'd imagined. She didn't feel quite the sense of victory or relief she'd fantasized about. She certainly hadn't expected it today, of all days.

This morning began as almost every other one in her life had done. She awoke well before dawn, showered, dressed, braided her ridiculously long hair that her mother insisted was something to be proud of (but not too proud...for vanity was a sin, after all). She tiptoed down the back stairs of their old farmhouse into the kitchen, hoping as she did every day that she might not attract any unwanted attention, eat some morsel in peace, and then escape for a few hours to the relative obscurity of school, where she could quietly keep her head down, observing and learning about the real world, anticipating joining it some day soon.

She hadn't expected anything special. She certainly knew better than to look for gifts or a cake. No one ever marked the anniversary of her entry into this world. Such celebrations smacked of paganism and were an affront to God...just ask her father.

But to her surprise, she'd discovered a stranger seated at the kitchen table. Along with her brother, her mother, and... her father. Amanda had stood in silence at the foot of the stairs, frozen in confusion.

"Good morning, sissy," her father addressed her.

Amanda knew a greeting should sound more welcoming. Her still-sore stomach clenched. "Good morning."

An unusually large pile of food lay on the table. Nervously, she slid into her seat. She knew better than to serve herself any of the breakfast...it was clearly not intended for her, but rather for the benefit of their guest. She swallowed anxiously as her older brother, Phillip Jr., shoveled toast and sausage down his gullet, taking advantage of the uncommon bounty rather than questioning it, despite the warning glares from their parents.

"Today is your birthday, is it not?" her father asked her.

Even Phillip Jr. paused his gorging in stunned silence. A crumb fell from the corner of his mouth onto the table.

"Yes, sir," Amanda replied, carefully controlling a spike of fear that threatened to affect her voice.

"And you are now eighteen years of age?"

"I am." She averted her eyes in what her father chose to interpret as a sign of respect rather than loathing.

"I thought so," he said. "Amanda, you will be pleased to know your presence at school is no longer required."

"What!?" Her head jerked up, and she insolently searched her father's face, praying she'd misheard. Regrettably, she was unable to master her shocked disappointment more quickly.

Phillip Ryder Senior did not have an especially expressive face. His features were taciturn; his grey eyes generally cold. Amanda was a practiced reader of his expressions, however, and saw far more than the stranger at the table did. Her little outburst...which he construed as a threat to his authority...would surely cost her something later.

"You are finished with school," he said, carefully enunciating every word as if she were mentally defective. Each one was a dagger twisting in her gut.

Amanda scanned the room and noticed her book bag was nowhere to be seen. Her father must've hidden it if not outright destroyed it while she'd slept last night.

Without any warning, he cut her off from *thereal* world...which was drowning in sin, as he frequently asserted. Instead, he lashed her to the slave ship his house had become. Any chance of normalcy had just been scuttled; without even a high school diploma, she'd have no hope of escape, unfit for anything but ignorant breeding of more mindless, subjugated witnesses to *his* version of the truth.

"I'd'a thought most kids your age would be glad not to go to school no more," the stranger chuckled. But the unfamiliar man's awkward attempt at levity was unappreciated and largely ignored by the family seated around him.

Against her better judgment, Amanda risked speaking the truth. "B-but... I like school."

Phillip Senior's eyes narrowed. The gesture was barely noticeable, but Amanda recognized it for the glaring scowl it represented. "I am your father, girl. And I will not be questioned."

Amanda's dulled stare expressed a sublimated fury of her own. "Yes, sir."

He shook his head minutely in angry warning, then took a sip of steaming coffee. "And now, we'll see to purifying your immortal soul."

She glanced at the stranger, understanding finally settling on her mind. Other kids her age got presents of clothes, concert tickets, or video games for their birthdays. One boy in her class had even received a car on his sixteenth. But it was in that moment she realized her gift was to be yet another exorcism.

Amanda had been the subject of at least a dozen deliverance ceremonies over the years of her life...and those were just the ones that had taken place since she was old enough to remember them with any confidence. They were for the most part harmless, though she wouldn't go so far as to claim any comfort in their familiarity. Such trials were often long, drawn out affairs, fraught with anxiety. She'd be interrogated, every action examined, every utterance dissected for evidence of demonic possession. She'd recite whatever oaths or bible verses they told her to recite, go hungry for as long as they required her to fast, and most likely get dunked in the bathtub for good measure...just in case the previous twenty-odd baptisms hadn't taken.

But Amanda understood it didn't really matter what she said or did to defend herself. Her father was convinced of her sinful nature, and his was the only opinion that counted as long as she lived under his roof.

She couldn't help who...or what...she was. It wasn't her fault she could see, hear, *sense* things no one else around her could. Despite her father's accusations to the contrary, there was never any conscious decision or satanic negotiation whereupon her abilities had been bestowed upon her. She couldn't remember a time when she was unable to do what she did. She'd simply been born this way.

She only wished she'd had the sense to keep it hidden. But as a child, she lacked such foresight and control. She stupidly blurted out the evidence of her abnormality or accidentally summoned something she wanted before realizing what she'd done. It had taken innumerable beatings to suppress that part of her nature, rigorous practice to

reliably move her body toward the object she wanted, rather than the other way around.

She'd spent years now hiding herself and what she could do from the outside world. Overall, her "gifts" had proven themselves far more trouble than they were worth. Proof in point: her present situation.

She submitted to the cleansing rites all morning long. Her stomach growling with hunger, she expressed her remorse for whatever imaginary sins she'd committed, rejected Satan and sworn to accept Jesus Christ as her personal savior for what had to be the hundredth time, obediently pleaded for his forgiveness and aid to abandon her unholy ways. The whole thing had, for the most part, gone as expected. Almost.

Then something had gone horribly wrong. And as a result, she'd just joined the swollen ranks of homeless teenagers.

Amanda slowed her pace as she exited the woods and approached a house, hoping her father was right for once, and that she had some talent for lying. She took a moment to collect herself...it would not do to frighten the little old lady that just might prove to be her deliverance. She put the morning's disturbing events from her mind, brought her breathing and heart rate under control, then knocked on the door.

It opened a few moments later. "Amanda!?" the hunchbacked little woman exclaimed in a quavering voice.

"Yes, ma'am," she said with as much of a smile as she could muster.

The old woman's wrinkled face puckered further in confusion. "Why aren't you in school, dear? Is something wrong?"

"I... I need your help, Mrs. Bruner."

Mrs. Bruner looked searchingly at her for a moment, then nodded knowingly. "Come in, dear," she said, shuffling her warped body aside.

Amanda stepped inside the warm, welcoming little home.