
TAMING THE BEAST

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Taming the Beast
EBook ISBN:
978-1-63954-324-3

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design
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Chapter 1

BALTIMORE, *Maryland, January 1880*

It was a horrible winter day. The sky was dark shades of gray, and rain was beating down relentlessly. Lorelai Brentwood stood by her mother's grave. She didn't see the gravediggers shoveling mud on her mother's cheap wooden coffin through her tears. There would be no tombstone, only a cheap wooden marker with her name painted on it. The paint would fade and chip off the cross in a few months, and any evidence of her mother's life would disappear.

Two rain-soaked carpetbags held the only possessions Lorelai owned. She'd been evicted from the room she'd shared with her mother that morning. She only had one place to go; if Harriet Brentwood had known, she would have turned over in her grave.

Lorelai didn't bother to wipe away the tears. She picked up the carpet bags and trudged through the mud. There was a long walk ahead of her.

Hidden behind a door and looking through the cracks of

a shed wall, Lorelai watched the large house across the road. She had snuck into the shed, and it would have to do for the night. She didn't want to encounter any of the men entering the house. The piano music was loud, and so was the raucous laughter from men and giggles from the women. She could see the lantern lights in the upstairs windows and occasionally a silhouette of a half-dressed woman through the thin curtains. This was not what Lorelai's parents had wanted for her future. Those plans had fallen to the wayside several years before. The family debts had fallen on her shoulders now that her mother was gone.

Lorelai closed the shed door and lay on a pile of empty burlap feed bags. She dried the wetness on her face, not knowing if it was rain or her tears, before falling into an exhausted asleep.

She was awakened with a hard shake and opened her eyes to Mabel Schultz, her maternal aunt.

"What are you doing in here, gal?" Mabel demanded.

"I don't know where else to go," Lorelai whispered.

"Harriet is gone?" Mabel asked.

"Yes, ma'am, Momma has passed."

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" Mabel scolded. "You're soaking wet! Get your things, and come on over to my place."

"What about..."

"My girls work nights and sleep late into the day," Mabel exclaimed. She walked over to her house and led her niece to a drawing-room. There were empty liquor glasses on every surface. "We had a good night. Friday and Saturday are generally my best money-maker days. Why'd you come here?" Mabel demanded.

"I don't know what to do," Lorelai said. She dug into one of the carpetbags and removed a stack of letters. "Momma and I have been getting these in the mail. At first, the letters

were addressed to Momma, but after I wrote to them and explained that she was sick, they started to send them to me. They say if I don't pay what is owed, I will be arrested and sent to prison!"

"Well, that ain't happening," Mabel exclaimed, slapping her hand on a heavy thigh.

"The only job I've ever worked was at a mill, and I had to leave that when Momma got sicker two weeks ago. I barely earned enough to pay for the rent of our room. I can't earn enough to pay my father's debt, and I don't want to go to prison! What can I do?"

"I don't know yet, but you ain't going to be one of my girls. That's for damn sure! You were raised to be a lady. Not to end up in a whorehouse. I'll give you a room to sleep in and have Sally fix you a good breakfast. You look like you're about to blow away in the wind. I'll figure out something. In the meantime, you can help Sally with the cleaning and cooking."

Mabel Schultz straightened her best dress over her large breasts. Her dress was getting too tight, so she sucked in her gut because she refused to wear a corset. Not that she had found one that would fit around her formidable girth for quite some time. She tied her buggy to the horse post and marched up the walk to a stone house that resembled a fortress.

She knew the house's history because she'd asked in the nearest town. The Graystone house had been built by a tobacco grower from southern Maryland. A staunch rebel during the fighting, the southerner had held onto his fortune, multiple homes, and land during the war. He had survived only to be struck down by cholera.

Damian Winslow had purchased the Graystone mansion a decade earlier. Since he'd taken possession, the property had gained a reputation of being haunted. He didn't care as long as people left him alone. Damian had been called many things, from a genius to a madman. He was a world-renowned artist of massive sculptures and paintings that hung in only the wealthiest homes, museums, and buildings worldwide.

She knew him because he'd been a regular customer for a while. He was also known for his foul temper, and most people kept a distance, fearing an eruption. At six and a half feet tall, he walked around with a scowl of displeasure on his face most of the time. Without the frown, he was a good-looking man. His height caused him to bend his head when walking through doorways. He was also fit and strong as he used a hammer and chisel to create beautiful sculptures from massive pieces of alabaster, marble, and other types of stone. Part of his allure was his black wavy hair, thick eyebrows, and a close-cut beard that somehow looked dashing and untamed. His piercing gray eyes had caught the attention of many well-to-do daughters, but his only love was for stone, canvas, and willing women.

Mabel knocked, and the man himself opened the door. He raised an insolent eyebrow. "Going door-to-door for customers now?"

"No, but I have a proposition for you," Mabel said. He swung the door open, and she followed him to an office, and he offered her a drink.

Damian gulped his whiskey down. "I've been thinking about coming over to your place. I could use a woman and some relief. Noreen found a man who wanted to marry her. She took off with him without any warning!"

"I heard," Mabel said. "I've got a girl in mind for you.

She's not a whore. She's a decent girl, but she's in a tough spot. She's been educated, and she could replace Noreen."

"Noreen was my all-around assistant, and she shared my bed," Damian growled. "She wasn't a looker, though, and I couldn't use her as a model. She was disproportional in all the wrong places. Why the hell did I keep her so long?"

"Because no one else would deal with you," Mabel said bluntly. "You're obsessed with a woman's ass, and you like whacking on them. It's weird, but it's better than those who take their fists to the girls."

Damian glared at her, but Mabel ignored him.

"The girl I have in mind is beautiful. She's been offered marriage several times but has turned them down. She had her reasons. Most recently, she wouldn't leave her mother, who was dying. Now, she's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Damian demanded. "I don't need any brats running around!"

"Not that kind of trouble. As far as I know, she is pure and untouched. That's been one of the reasons she hasn't married. Doctors have said she is an incomplete woman and will be barren," Mabel said. "That problem aside, she is lovely. There are debts owed by her parents that need to be paid."

"So, you want me to pay the debts?"

"Yes, in exchange for a contract stating that she would work for you for five years. Once she is trained, she will benefit you and your work. She would make a beautiful model. Lorelai has the face and disposition of an angel."

"Then why would she tangle with the devil himself?" Damian demanded. "You said she wasn't a whore? Most women willing to pose naked are free with their favors!"

"She isn't. She's a young girl who is desperate and scared. She is also my niece."

"Keeping me sexually satisfied is part of the job,"

Damian growled, looking dangerous. “Why would you propose this to your niece?”

“Because she doesn’t belong in a whorehouse,” Mabel said. “Sleeping with one man is different than taking on customers by the half-hour. I promised my sister I would never take Lorelai into my business.”

“I’m not a charitable man!”

“You’re decent, and that’s more than I can say about most men,” Mabel said.

“I’ll think about it,” he growled.

Damian swore, wadded a piece of paper, and tossed it onto the floor. He was wasting his time, and he needed to start on a sculpture. He kept looking at the large piece of marble in his studio, but he couldn’t see what it offered. A masterpiece was in there, his instincts and ego knew it, but his mind couldn’t see it. Not yet.

He had contacted a friend, who had supplied him with his last two secretaries. Each of the three women sent to him had been dismissed within hours. He couldn’t and wouldn’t tolerate incompetence. None of them could write a decent letter without it being dictated. He paid well for an assistant who knew how to use their brain and would share their bodies. He didn’t have the disposition to waste time with idiots, and the women hadn’t interested him in the least.

Damian slammed his pen down on his desk, and black ink began to spread over his desk. He cursed again and cleared the desk with a sweep of his arm. Shoving back from his desk, he stormed from his house.

Mabel recognized the horse before she saw the man. Her girls were still upstairs asleep, and she was glad for it. She hurried to the kitchen. "Lorelai, run upstairs and put on that new dress I bought you!"

The color drained from her niece's face. "Is he here?"

"Yes!"

"Aunt Mabel, I don't know if I can do this?"

"Do you have an alternative? If this doesn't pan out, sooner or later, you'll be working upstairs," Mabel said harshly.

Lorelai's eyes filled with tears, but she nodded and scurried to the small room she'd been using at the back of the house. She was glad the girls upstairs were still sleeping. They made fun of her for being naïve. They deliberately embarrassed her by detailing what they did with their customers. The women bragged about how many men they slept with the night before. They boasted about how much money they made each night.

Aunt Mabel had kept Lorelai busy working with the cook in the kitchen. Lorelai knew her aunt spoke the truth. Men had seen her and been asking for her. So far, Mabel had stopped them. Her aunt's house of ill repute catered to wealthy men. Many of the men were leaders in the city of Baltimore. They were powerful men of influence and got what they wanted. Mabel needed their cooperation to stay open. She paid them with cash and favors, not to shut her down. Men of their stature didn't take no for an answer. Mabel's livelihood depended on those men keeping her secrets and ignoring the laws.

Lorelai was terrified of the scheme Mabel had proposed. Five years of her life in an indentureship wasn't legal, but it might keep her out of prison.

Damian stood when a young woman entered the room. She looked out of place in a whore house where the

women were coarse, painted, and cheap. This beauty would have stood out at a high society debutante ball. As Mabel had described, she was young, beautiful, and innocent. She could have been fifteen or twenty-five. There was clarity and intelligence in her pale blue eyes. Her complexion was pale, almost frail, and she needed a few extra pounds.

She wore a pale green dress, with blonde hair tied back in a bun. She looked frightened, but Damian was intrigued. He could sense she would be a challenge.

“Leave the room, Mabel,” Damian ordered, and Mabel obeyed, although she gave her niece a nod of approval, or maybe it was hope. “Come closer, and tell me your name and age.”

The young woman stepped closer to him. “Lorelai Brentwood and I turned twenty a week ago.”

“Turn completely around,” Damian motioned with his hand.

She turned around and returned to her position of appraising him.

“You are perfect for the marble. Do you have any birthmarks?”

Her eyes showed confusion at his inquiry.

“No, sir.”

“Has Mabel explained what I would require of you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t have any objections to sleeping in my bed as part of your job?” he demanded harshly.

“I would prefer not, but I will do what is required,” she answered, her face blushing and her eyes dropping to the floor.

“I haven’t seen a woman blush in years,” Damian said gruffly. “Show me a sample of your handwriting.”

Lorelai went to a small desk and removed paper, a dip-

pen, and an ink bottle. She filled the pen and wrote something on a piece of paper. She handed it to him.

Damian took it from her and looked at the neat script and a few lines from Shakespeare's Hamlet. He handed it back to her. "What is 14,698, plus 8,262?" He expected her to do the tabulation on paper. When she made no move, he knew she hadn't been taught mathematics as so many women weren't.

"Twenty-two thousand, nine hundred and sixty," Lorelai answered.

"You have been taught well," Damian said, surprised. "Will you pose nude?"

Lorelai blushed again and swallowed. "I wasn't told of that condition," she said. "But, if it is required, and no one else will see me, I will agree. I assume you want me to pose for a sculpture or a painting."

"Both, I think. Why are you willing to accept my offer?" Damian asked bluntly.

The woman before him wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, but she continued to face him. "I have no other recourse. A credit agency has threatened to send me to prison for not paying my father's debt. I knew a woman who spent time in prison. She was... abused by the guards every day, and she was beaten if she complained about being violated. She gave birth to two children while in prison, and they were taken from her. She has no idea what happened to them.

"I have no wish to die, but I would jump in the harbor before being treated like that. I would drown as I do not swim. You are only one man; presumably, after five years, my debt would be paid, and I would be able to start a new life."

"Debtor's prisons were shut down in 1833," Damian said.

"Most people think so, but it's not true. Congress

voted to close down federally owned and financed debtor's prisons, and they did. They shifted the responsibility to the states. Maryland still puts people in state jails for unpaid debts. My father took out a loan to save his business. Unfortunately, he died soon afterward. My mother and I tried to pay it back, but she became ill. The letters the loan company has been sending to us are frightening."

"And, you are willing to accept my terms to get the loan paid?" Damian demanded.

"Yes, if I have proof of the paid debt, and you promise not to harm me," she said softly. "If you keep your word, I will keep mine."

"I always keep my word," Damian growled. He walked around her, studying her. "Are you aware of what goes on between a man and a woman?"

Lorelai's cheeks flushed with color again, and she lowered her eyes. "Currently, I live in a den of prostitution. The girls speak openly about what goes on in their rooms."

"What do you need to cancel your debt?"

"Two thousand dollars. It's not my debt, but I'm being held accountable for it. They have already threatened that I will be jailed if I don't pay."

"How old were you when the loan was taken?" Damian asked.

"Sixteen," she admitted.

"Did you sign anything?"

"No, we weren't aware of it. My father never spoke to my mother or myself about his business transactions," Lorelai answered.

"Do you still have the letters threatening you?" Damian demanded.

"I do."

"Get them," Damian demanded.

The young woman nodded and ran from the room. She came back holding a stack of envelopes in her hand.

“Am I acceptable to take the job?” Lorelai whispered, and her lips trembled.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Damian said, taking the envelopes. “One more question.”

“Sir?”

“Are you a virgin?”

Lorelai paled and blushed.

“Never mind, I have my answer. I am a man of many passions, Miss Brentwood. I also have a lousy temper, but it’s who I am. I’ve been known to spank the hell out of a woman for being obstinate or disobedient. I would not beat a woman, and I don’t consider a well-earned spanking as being beaten. Five years is a long time to commit yourself.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she responded.

“Be ready to leave in three days,” Damian ordered. “If I return, the debt will be paid.”

Lorelai watched Damian Winslow stride from the house as if he were on a mission. He was the embodiment of rage.

“Did he accept the proposition?” Mabel asked, coming into the parlor.

“I’m not sure. Mr. Winslow said the debt would be paid if he returned for me Friday. You didn’t tell me he was such a large man. He’s frightening and asked me if I would pose nude for him.”

“Damian Winslow is an artist and a sculptor. He has created sculptures for wealthy people, politicians, towns, museums, and governments. I don’t think he is a happy man unless he’s working on a masterpiece. He won’t be easy to live with, but you’ll get those horrible debtors off your back. He did agree to pay the debt, didn’t he?” Mabel asked.

“Yes. If he returns on Friday, he said the debt would be paid. He scares me.”

“He’s a man, honey,” Mabel said. “He’ll teach you what he wants, and you’ll figure out what makes him tick. You’ll get him under control soon enough if you’re as smart as I think you are.”

“I don’t think that will ever happen,” Lorelai whispered with a shudder.

Damian rode into the city of Baltimore and asked a carriage driver how to get to the return address printed on the envelopes Lorelai Brentwood had given him. It was a small building, and he shoved the door open. By size alone, he intimidated most people.

A young man looked up from a desk and frowned at the tall, angry-looking man approaching him. “May I help you, sir?”

“Yes, I want to speak to the shithead named Penrod Frazier.”

“Sir? Do you have an appointment?”

“Just get the asshole out here,” Damian ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

A medium-sized man pretentiously dressed came into the waiting room. “May I help you, sir?”

“You can if you are the shithead who has been harassing Miss Lorelai Brentwood and her recently deceased mother. You have no right to threaten them over a loan taken out by her father four years ago.”

“And, who would you be, sir?”

“I am Damian Winslow, and you will get off your ass and write a letter to Miss Brentwood. You will exonerate her of all responsibility for a loan taken out by her late father when she was a child. You will inform her that she isn’t responsible and apologize for terrifying her with the threat of prison.”

“Well, of course,” Mr. Frazier said nervously. “I’m sure someone has made a mistake.”

“Yes, there has been a mistake, and you’re the one who has made it,” Damian shouted. “Your signature is on every one of these letters! I’m sure the Baltimore Sun would be quite interested in how your company has threatened an innocent young woman with prison!”

Three men who had been waiting in the lobby scurried out the door.

“Sir, if you would come with me, I’m sure we can settle this,” Penrod Frazier said. He recognized the giant of a man considered one of this century’s most accomplished sculptors. In newspaper articles, he was compared to Michelangelo. Damian Winslow was also reported as being temperamental and dangerous.

An hour later, Damian walked out of the office with a letter absolving Lorelai of her father’s loan responsibility. He also had a letter of apology and a compensation cheque for harassing her.

Damian realized he might have just ended the agreement he’d made earlier. Still, despite his faults, he despised men who used their positions to deliberately hurt innocent people. If Lorelai backed out of the deal, she would have enough money to live comfortably for quite a few years.

Three days later, Lorelai was packed, ready, and waiting. She had a third carpet bag now. Mabel had been generous and purchased her niece several new dresses, undergarments, badly needed shoes, and a winter cloak.

“He’s not going to be an easy man to live with, but it’s better than staying here,” Mabel said, sounding worried. “Just remember, honey. Treat a man right, and he’ll treat you the same.”

Lorelai nodded at her aunt’s advice. She had been listening to it ever since Damian Winslow had left. Her aunt’s

words were in addition to what the girls were telling her. She was scared, but her aunt's solution to the problem was better than going to prison. Lorelai was scared and kept her hands clasped behind her back because she couldn't stop them from shaking.

"This was your idea," Lorelai reminded her aunt.

"He's here," Mabel exclaimed, looking out a window.

Damian knocked on the door, and Mabel opened it and stepped aside.

"Is she here?" he demanded.

"Yes, and ready."

"I need to speak to her first," Damian said gruffly.

"I'm here," Lorelai said, standing in the doorway of the parlor.

Damian crossed the hallway, and she backed away from him. He closed the pocket doors behind himself. He handed her an envelope. "Open it."

Lorelai opened it, and her eyes opened wide as she scanned the pages and looked at the bank cheque.

Before she could speak, Damian spoke. "There was no debt to pay, and Mr. Penrod Frazier knows if he tries to use these tactics again, I'll put him out of business!"

"Thank you," Lorelai said softly. "If no debt is owed, and this check is compensation for threatening me, does this mean you don't want to hire me?"

"No, I mean yes," Damian exclaimed. "The debt was never owed. It was a crooked businessman trying to take advantage of two women. I still want you as my assistant. I want you to pose for me, and I also want you as a woman. I demand a lot, but I haven't slept for two days thinking this through. I haven't been able to think of anything except my muse. That's you. Now that I've met you, I can't contemplate losing you. I need to capture you on canvas and in stone! But

now, the circumstances are different, and you don't need to take the job."

"I gave you my word, and I don't intend to break it," Lorelai said. "The threat of prison may be gone, but I still have few work prospects. I owe you for what you have done to help me, and I will do what you ask of me."

"I have a terrible temper," Damian admitted.

"You have warned me," Lorelai said calmly. "I am wary of some of the things you'll ask of me, but I can only admire and thank you for what you have done!"

Damian closed the distance between them and pulled Lorelai into an unexpected kiss.

Lorelai had been kissed by a young suitor once. That kiss hadn't felt anything like the kiss from Damian Winslow. Her mind went blank for a few seconds, but a knock on the door broke them apart.

"Is everything settled?" Mabel asked.

Damian looked to Lorelai to make the decision, and she nodded.

"You'll pay her decently? Treat her respectfully?" Mabel demanded.

"She won't want for anything," Damian promised.