

Powerful Italian, Penniless Housekeeper

The story behind the story...

I honestly can't remember where the initial idea for this book came from, only that it had been forming in my mind for a long time before I actually decided to write it, and I originally dismissed it out of hand as having far too many secondary characters. However, after writing cool, fragile, beautiful Lily in *Spanish Aristocrat*, *Forced Bride* I really wanted to create a heroine who was down to earth, self-deprecating and chaotic and I knew that the overweight, overshadowed sister of the bride in this story was just the girl for the job.

It's very much the heroine's story. Emerging from an ego-crushing, part-time relationship with a commitment-phobe cheat, Sarah Halliday is left with a broken heart and a five year old daughter, and she genuinely believes—as so many of us do at low points in our lives—that she has nothing to offer; that she is not pretty enough or successful enough or thin and glamorous enough for anyone to be interested in her. She's wrong, of course, and I wanted to make the man who helps her to see that extra specially strong and brilliant.

Lorenzo Cavalleri was a departure from my previous heroes in several ways. Older for a start, he has been married before and as a result is battle-weary and cynical, particularly when it comes to the seductive charms of beautiful women. It was important to me that he should not be defined too much by what he looks like—he's a man who's attractive, not because of his appearance but because of the strength of his personality. And really, that was what this book was about—authenticity; the cult of celebrity perfection, and two people who, like most of us, don't look like they've just stepped out of an advert for Ralph Lauren. I have a deep personal antipathy to those magazines that are full of airbrushed celebrity photoshoots right next to pages of spiteful exposes of hapless actresses and models and soap stars with their roots/crows feet/cellulite showing, and I suppose this was my small (OK—infinitesimal) way of making the point that the passion between *real* people, with grey hair and generous curves, is more genuine and profound and authentic than anything that springs from an illusion of plastic perfection.

The book is set in Tuscany and south Oxfordshire, where my husband comes from and where his family still live. It's a really beautiful part of England, and I have really happy memories of being there in the long hot summer when we first met and we had no children and nothing to do keep us from hanging around in the gardens of lovely country pubs, like the one in which Sarah and Lorenzo meet. Happy days!

Extract from the book

God it was hot. Everyone else had gone to bed long ago, extinguishing the candles in the limonaia so that the open doors of the brightly lit kitchen had been a lone beacon of welcome for every moth and mosquito in the area. They had launched bombing raids on the light above the table, dropping, stunned, into the vinaigrette dressing she had made to accompany the bresaola and the cream she had whipped for the cake, until eventually it seemed simpler to just close the doors and swelter.

And swelter she did. During the day the castle-thick walls of the palazzo's amazing kitchen kept the space cool, but now, with the oven on and not a breath of air from outside, the heat gathered and swelled within them. Sarah's hair was damp with sweat as she kept her stove-top vigil over the custard, and beneath her apron the nylon lining of her dress stuck to her body like a polythene bag.

Another boiling surge of shame rose inside her as she remembered the way Lorenzo had looked at her when she walked into his study, with that mixture of irritation and alarm. With a groan she pulled desperately at the apron strings knotted around her waist. Yanking it over her head, she wiped her damp face with it, making sure that her stirring didn't falter. It was cooler without it, but not much. Her dress was clinging to her like bindweed, so that it was impossible to breathe. She couldn't bear it any longer.

Undoing the small pearl button at the neck she dropped the spoon long enough to pull the dress down over her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

The relief was blissful.

Instantly she felt calmer, more in control. She picked up the apron and looped it back over her head, loving the feel of the sweat cooling on her back as she tied it round her again. If anyone came in she would still look perfectly respectable from the front, but the likelihood of that happening was remote. It was almost two o'clock in the morning; everyone was asleep. Silence lay over Castellaccio's lovely rooms like a sepia shroud, a brief spell of peace before the frantic activity of the wedding tomorrow.

The wedding. She felt overwhelmed with weariness at the thought.

Earlier she'd heard Lorenzo pointing Guy in the direction of the cellars where the tables that had been used at his own wedding were stored, and her heart ached for him as she realised how bloody awful it must be to have all this taking place around him. No wonder he had looked at her with such annoyance. She wondered if he'd been thinking about Tia; if that beautiful, poignant music held some special significance for them both.

The mixture in the pan was thickening now, approaching that magical point where its transformation to the rich, unctuous crême patisserie that was needed for traditional Italian wedding cake would be complete. Sarah kept stirring, not taking her eyes off it for fear of missing the crucial moment when it would go too far and curdle; not wanting to lose her nerve and take it off the heat too soon.

The door opened.

Stupidly, for a second all she felt was a distant irritation at being disturbed at such a critical time. And then, of course, she looked up and saw it was Lorenzo, bringing back the tray, and remembered at that exact moment that she had taken her dress off.

Horror drenched her; a suffocating wave.

She half-turned, so that she was standing at an awkward angle beside the cooker, facing stiffly towards him. The huge butcher's block stood between them, affording her a measure of protection.

‘Just leave the tray on there,’ she said quickly.

He put it down.

‘*Grazie*. It was delicious.’

His tone was distant and formal, and she replied with the same stiffness.

‘No problem. As I said it was no trouble, but I’m sorry to have disturbed you.’

He hesitated for a moment, then sighed. ‘No, I came to apologise to you. For being so rude. I’m very antisocial when I’m working.’

Sarah glanced down and let out a yelp of dismay, yanking the pan off the heat as she realised— too late— that the glossy, silken crème of a moment ago was now separating into a disastrous grainy mess.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘The custard’s curdled,’ she moaned, gritting her teeth against the tide of vitriolic curses that would virtually bankrupt her if Lottie had been in earshot. Lorenzo was by her side in an instant, silencing her anguished protests as he removed the heavy pan from her hands, leaving her free to rush to the sink and turn on the cold tap.

Water cascaded down so forcefully that it spayed all over her, but she hardly noticed. Spinning round to get the pan she almost collided with him bringing it over to her, and for a split second they hesitated, staring helplessly at each other. Suddenly the heavy air seemed to pulse with promise. His eyes burned into her as she reached out to take the pan from him, her hands closing over his on the handle.

He let go immediately, standing back as she plunged the pan into the cold water, then as she bent over the sink and started to whisk for all she was worth he leaned over and held it steady for her, his eyes never leaving hers.

Except when they moved downwards, to where her breasts were virtually falling out of her bra beneath the apron.

She gave a low moan, trying to focus her attention on what she was doing. What she was *actually* doing, not what she wanted to do, and what every atom and fibre of her being was screaming at her to do. *Like twist her body round so that she was standing in front of him, lift her arms and wrap them around his strong, tanned neck, tilt her face up and press her lips against his hard, set mouth...*

Oh God, it was no good. The custard was disintegrating, and so was she. Falling apart. Desperately she redoubled her efforts, whimpering with the effort of not giving up. Or giving in.

‘Sarah... stop’

Lorenzo barely recognised that guttural rasp as his own voice. Letting go of the pan he took hold of her upper arms, wrenching her round. He could feel the heat coming off her damp,

voluptuous body and as he touched her, she gave a shivery gasp, jerking beneath his cold wet hands.

That was what did it, what tore through his iron self-control. That shiver of sensual awareness seemed to reverberate through his own body and galvanise him into actions he couldn't control. Suddenly he was pulling her against him as their mouths met and their lips parted and he was running his slippery hands over her bare back, beneath her hot, vanilla scented hair and dripping cold water on her burning skin.

From the book Powerful Italian, Penniless Housekeeper by India Grey Harlequin Mills & Boon Modern Romance Publication Date: January 2010 ISBN: 9780263877588 Copyright © 2009 by India Grey® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. The edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A

Reviews

Romantic Times (four stars)

Sarah Halliday, having just been dumped by the father of her child, is feeling out of sorts at her sister's hen weekend. And the next item on her scavenger-hunt list is an eligible bachelor. She ends up receiving a spectacular kiss from a stranger, then, in Italy for the wedding, meeting him again. He's film director Lorenzo Cavalleri, and they fall in love -- or so Sarah thinks, until she finds out he wants to turn her late father's book into a film. Does he just want to get the rights? This is no fairy tale; it's infinitely more real. Grey wonderfully portrays two people who have been let down by love undertaking the scary but exhilarating journey to finding a true partner.

—Sandra Garcia-Myers

Cataromance 4.5 stars

Powerful Italian, Penniless Housekeeper is the latest emotional tour de force by award-winning author India Grey! A talented storyteller who can make you laugh out loud on one page and then have you bawling your eyes out on the next, India Grey's richly textured, immensely absorbing and emotionally stirring contemporary romances are in a class all of their own and in Powerful Italian, Penniless Housekeeper, she tells the heart-wrenchingly moving story of two flawed souls whose hearts are made whole when they start to trust again.

The Good, The Bad and the Unread

Ms. Grey writes a terrific story here - everything falls into place just as it should. Nothing is too perfect, or too wrong, or too much. It's a thin line that requires delicate balance, and Ms. Grey walks it with aplomb...

Lorenzo and Sarah acted as themselves, which gave both their persons, and the story an appreciable depth. In fact, this book made me cry. There were some scenes where I knew exactly what would happen, and it did as I predicted... but the language and words that Ms. Grey used were just so evocative.

I was also thrilled when this book came to the attention of the girls at Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, and earned this comment from Sarah. It felt totally like being a first year who just got noticed by the cool prefects...

I'm in a serious Presents mood lately, and read the January 2010 India Grey novel Powerful Italian, Penniless Housekeeper this week. The writing was exceptional - and the hero wasn't

an Angry Boner Man. You know, the Presents hero whose fascination with the heroine is mostly based on the fact that he has a boner for her and he's really REALLY mad about it? I HAVE A BONER. NO LIKE BONER. SMASH BONER. OW. Anyway, the Grey novel did not possess an Angry Boner Man hero, for which I was very, very thankful.