



Leonetti's Housekeeper Bride (Harlequin Presents)

By Lynne Graham

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His Innocent Wife...

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Convinced his grandfather is mad, Gaetano sets about proving him wrong with housekeeper Poppy Arnold. With her outspoken nature and unusual dress sense, she's definitely not wife material!

But it's not long before hardworking, self-sacrificing Poppy charms his grandfather and Gaetano's stuck with a union he didn't want and a bride he sinfully craves! Having set her up to fail, can he really take the precious gift of her virginity?

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Leonetti's Housekeeper Bride (Harlequin Presents) By Lynne Graham Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1373458 in Books
- Published on: 2016-01-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.56" h x .50" w x 4.25" l, .21 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 192 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham lives in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. Happily married, Lynne has five children. Her eldest is her only natural child. Her other children, who are every bit as dear to her heart, are adopted. The family has a variety of pets, and Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collecting allsorts and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas.

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Gaetano Leonetti was having a very bad day. It had started at dawn, when his phone went off and proceeded to show him a series of photos that enraged him but which he knew would enrage his grandfather and the very conservative board of the Leonetti investment bank even more. Regrettably, sacking the woman responsible for the story in the downmarket tabloid was likely to be the sole satisfaction he could hope to receive.

'It's not your fault,' Tom Sandyford, Gaetano's middle-aged legal adviser and close friend, told him quietly.

'Of course it's *my* fault,' Gaetano growled. 'It was *my* house, *my* party and the woman in *my* bed at the time who organised the damned party—'

'Celia was that soap star with the cocaine habit you didn't know about,' Tom reminisced. 'Wasn't she sacked from the show soon after you ditched her?'

Gaetano nodded, his even white teeth gritting harder.

'It's a case of bad luck...that's all,' Tom opined. 'You can't ask your guests to post their credentials beforehand, so you had no way of knowing some of them weren't tickety-boo.'

'Tickety-boo?' Gaetano repeated, his lean, darkly handsome features frowning. Although he was born and raised in England, Italian had been the language of his home and he still occasionally came across English words and phrases that were unfamiliar.

'Decent upstanding citizens,' Tom rephrased. 'So, a handful of them were hookers? Well, in the rarefied and very privileged world you move in, how were you supposed to find that out?'

'The press found it out,' Gaetano countered flatly.

'With the usual silly "Orgy at the Manor" big reveal. It'll be forgotten in five minutes...although that blonde dancing naked in the fountain out front is rather memorable,' Tom remarked, scanning the newspaper afresh with lascivious intent.

'I don't remember seeing her. I left the party early to fly to New York. Everyone still had their clothes on at that stage,' Gaetano said drily. 'I really don't need another scandal like this.'

'Scandal does rather seem to follow you around. I suppose the old man and the board at the bank are up in arms as usual,' Tom commented with sympathy.

Gaetano compressed his wide sensual mouth in silent agreement. In the name of family loyalty and respect, he was paying in the blood of his fierce pride and ambition for the latest scandal. Letting his seventy-four-year-old grandfather Rodolfo carpet him like a badly behaved schoolboy had proved to be a truly toxic experience for a billionaire whose investment advice was sought by governments both in the UK and abroad. And when Rodolfo had settled into his favourite preaching session about Gaetano's womanising lifestyle, Gaetano had had to breathe in deeply several times and resist the urge to point out to the older man that expectations and values had changed since the nineteen forties for both men *and* women.

Rodolfo Leonetti had married a humble fisherman's daughter at the age of twenty-one and during his fifty years of devoted marriage he had never looked at another woman. Ironically, his only child, Gaetano's father, Rocco, had not taken his father's advice on the benefits of making an early marriage either. Rocco had been a notorious playboy and an incorrigible gambler. He had married a woman young enough to be his daughter when he was in his fifties, had fathered one son and had expired ten years later after over-exerting himself in another woman's bed. Gaetano reckoned he had been paying for his father's sins almost from the hour of his birth. At the age of twenty-nine and one of the world's leading bankers, he was tired of being continually forced to prove his worth and confine his projects to the narrow expectations of the board. He had made millions for the Leonetti Bank; he *deserved* to be CEO.

Indeed, Rodolfo's angry ultimatum that very morning had outraged Gaetano.

'You will *never* be the chief executive of this bank until you change your way of life and settle down into being a respectable family man!' his grandfather had sworn angrily. 'I will not support your leadership with the board and, no matter how brilliant you are, Gaetano, the board *always* listens to me... They remember too well how your father almost brought the bank down with his risky ventures!'

Yet what, realistically, did Gaetano's sex life have to do with his acumen and expertise as a banker? Since when were a wife and children the only measure of a man's judgement and maturity?

Gaetano had not the slightest interest in getting married. In fact he shuddered at the idea of being anchored to one woman for the rest of his life while living in fear of a divorce that could deprive him of half of his financial portfolio. He was a very hard worker. He had earned his academic qualifications with honours in the most prestigious international institutions and his achievements since then had been immense. Why wasn't that enough? In comparison his father had been an academically slow and spoiled rich boy who, like Peter Pan, had refused to grow up. Such a comparison was grossly unfair.

Tom dealt Gaetano a rueful appraisal. 'You didn't get the old "find an ordinary girl" spiel again, did you?'

"An ordinary girl, *not* a party girl, one who takes pleasure in the *simple* things of life," Gaetano quoted verbatim because his grandfather's discourses always ran to the same conclusion: marry, settle down, father children with a home-loving female...and the world would then miraculously become Gaetano's oyster with little happy unicorns dancing on some misty horizon shaped by a rainbow. His lean bronzed features hardened with grim cynicism. He had seen just how well that fantasy had turned out for once-married and now happily divorced friends.

'Perhaps you could time travel back to the nineteen fifties to find this ordinary girl,' Tom quipped, wondering how the era of female liberation and career women had contrived to pass Rodolfo Leonetti by so completely that he still believed such women existed.

'The best of it is, if I did produce an *ordinary* girl and announce that I was going to marry her Rodolfo would

be appalled,' Gaetano breathed impatiently. 'He's too much of a snob. Unfortunately he's become so obsessed by his conviction that I need to marry that he's blocking my progression at the bank.'

His PA entered and extended two envelopes. 'The termination of contract on the grounds of the confidentiality clause which has been breached and the notice to quit the accommodation that goes with the job,' she specified. 'The helicopter is waiting for you on the roof, sir.'

'What's going on?' Tom asked.

'I'm flying down to Woodfield Hall to sack the housekeeper who handed over those photos to the press.'

'It was the *housekeeper*?' Tom prompted in surprise.

'She was named in the article. Not the brightest of women,' Gaetano pointed out drily.

Poppy leapt off her bike, kicked the support into place and ran into the village shop to buy milk. As usual she was running late but she could not drink coffee without milk and didn't feel properly awake until she had had at least two cups. Her mane of fiery red-gold curls bounced on her slim black-clad shoulders and her green eyes sparkled.

'Good morning, Frances,' she said cheerfully to the rather sour-looking older woman behind the counter as she dug into her purse to pay.

'I'm surprised you're so bright this morning,' the shop owner remarked in a tone laden with suggestive meaning.

'Why wouldn't I be?'

The older woman slapped a well-thumbed newspaper down on the counter and helpfully turned it round to enable Poppy to read the headline. Poppy paled with dismay and snatched the publication up, moving on impatiently to the next page only to groan at the familiar photo of the naked blonde cavorting in the fountain. Her brother, Damien, had definitely taken that photo on the night of that infamous party. She knew that because she had caught him showing that particular one off to his mates.

'Seems your ma has been talking out of turn,' Frances remarked. 'Shouldn't think Mr Leonetti will appreciate that...'

Glancing up to meet the older woman's avidly curious gaze, Poppy hastily paid for the paper and left the shop. That photo? How on earth had the newspaper got hold of it? And what about the other photos? The heaving, fortunately unidentifiable bodies in one of the bedrooms? When invited to join the party by a drunken guest, had Damien taken other, even more risqué pictures? And her mother... what insanity had persuaded her to risk her job by trashing her employer to a tabloid journalist? Poppy's soft full mouth down-curved and her shoulders slumped as she climbed back on her bike. Unfortunately Poppy knew exactly why her mother might have been so foolish: Jasmine Arnold was an alcoholic.

Poppy had once got her mother to an AA meeting and it had done her good but she had never managed to get the older woman back to a second. Instead, Jasmine just drank herself insensible every day while Poppy struggled to do her mother's job for her as well as doing her own. What else could she do when the very roof over their heads was dependent on Jasmine's continuing employment? And after all, wasn't it *her* fault that

her mother had sunk so low before Poppy realised how bad things had got in her own home and had finally come back to live with her family again?

It was very fortunate that Gaetano only visited the house once or twice a year. But then Gaetano was a city boy through and through and a beautiful Georgian country house an inconvenient distance from London was of little use or interest to him. Had he been a more regular visitor she would never have been able to conceal her mother's condition for so long.

Poppy pumped the bike pedals hard to get up the hill before careening at speed into the driveway of Woodfield Hall. The beautiful house had been the Leonetti family home in England since the eighteenth century when the family had first come over from Venice to set up as glorified moneylenders. And if there was one thing that family were good at it, it was making pots and pots of money, Poppy reflected ruefully, shying away from the challenge of thinking about Gaetano in an any more personal way.

She and Gaetano might have virtually grown up in the same household but it would be an outright lie to suggest that they were ever in any way friendly. After all, Gaetano was six years older and had spent most of his time in posh boarding schools.

But Poppy knew that Gaetano would go crazy about the publication of those photos. He was fanatical about his privacy and if his idea of fun was a sex party, she could perfectly understand why! Her spirits sank at the prospect of the trouble looming ahead. No matter how hard she worked life never seemed to get any easier and there always seemed to be another crisis waiting to erupt round the next corner. Yet how could she look after her mother and her brother when their own survival instincts appeared to be so poor?

The Arnold family lived in a flat that had been converted from part of the original stable block at the hall. Jasmine Arnold, a tall skinny redhead in her late forties, was sitting at the kitchen table when her daughter walked in.

Poppy slapped down the paper on the table. 'Mum? Were you out of your mind when you talked to a journalist about that party?' she demanded, before opening the back door and yelling her brother's name at the top of her voice.

Damien emerged from one of the garages, wiping oil stains off his hands with a dirty cloth. 'Where's the fire?' he asked irritably as his sister moved forward to greet him.

'You gave the photos you took at that party to a journalist?' his sister challenged in disbelief.

'No, I didn't,' her kid brother countered. 'Mum knew they were on my phone and she handed them over. She sold them. Got a pile of cash for them and the interview.'

Poppy was even more appalled. She could have excused stupidity or careless speech to the wrong person but she was genuinely shocked that her mother had taken money in return for her disloyalty to her employer.

Damien groaned at the expression on his sister's face. 'Poppy...you should know by now that Mum would do anything to get the money to buy her next drink,' he pointed out heavily. 'I told her not to hand over the photos or talk to the guy but she wouldn't listen to me—'

'Why didn't you tell me what she'd done?'

'What could you do about it? I hoped that maybe the photos wouldn't be used or that, if they were, nobody of any importance would see them,' Damien admitted. 'I doubt if Gaetano sits down to read every silly story that's written about him... I mean, he's never out of the papers!'

'But if you're wrong, Mum will be sacked and we'll be kicked out of the flat.'

Damien wasn't the type to worry about what might never happen and he said wryly, 'Let's hope I'm not wrong.'

But Poppy took after her late father and she was a worrier. It was hard to credit that it was only a few years since the Arnolds had been a secure and happy family of four. Her father had been the gardener at Woodfield Hall and her mother the housekeeper. At twenty years of age, Poppy had been two years into her training at nursing school and Damien had just completed his apprenticeship as a car mechanic. And then without any warning at all their much-loved father had dropped dead and all their lives had been shattered by that cruelly sudden bereavement.

Poppy had taken time out from her course to try and help her mother through the worst of her grief and then she had returned to her studies. Unhappily and without her knowledge, things had gone badly wrong at that point. Her mother had gone off the rails and Damien had been unable to cope with what was happening in his home. Her brother had then got in with the wrong crowd and had ended up in prison. That was when Poppy had finally come home to find her mother sunk in depression and drinking heavily. Poppy had taken a leave of absence from her course, hoping, indeed expecting, that her mother would soon pull round again. Unfortunately that hadn't happened. Although Jasmine was still drinking, Poppy's one consolation was that, after earning early release from prison with his good behaviour, her little brother had got his act together again. Sadly, however, Damien's criminal record had made it impossible for him to get a job.

Poppy still felt horribly guilty about the fact that she had left her kid brother to deal with her deeply troubled mother. Intent on pursuing her chosen career and being the first Arnold female in generations *not* to earn her living by serving the Leonettis, she had been selfish and thoughtless and she had been trying to make up for that mistake ever since.

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