



Unwrapping the Castelli Secret (Secret Heirs of Billionaires)

By Caitlin Crews

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An heir for Christmas!

Five years ago, Lily Holloway walked away from a car crash, turning her back on the forbidden passion she shared with her stepbrother, Rafael Castelli. Nothing could make Lily return to the irresistible Italian's demanding world.

Now, when their paths cross again, Lily is desperate to retain her freedom and claims amnesia has blocked her memories of him. Yet all deception is quickly burned away by the incredible attraction that still simmers between them.

But he's found her, and she knows Rafael will soon discover her greatest secret...their son!

A passionate read for Christmas nights!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Caitlin Crews discovered her first romance novel at the age of twelve and has since began her life-long love affair with romance novels, many of which she insists on keeping near her at all times. She currently lives in California, with her animator/comic book artist husband and their menagerie of ridiculous animals.

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Rafael Castelli was entirely too familiar with ghosts.

He'd seen them everywhere in those first dark months following the accident. Every woman with anything resembling strawberry blond hair was his Lily in a certain light. A hint of her scent in a passing crowd, the suggestion of her delicate features across a busy train car, a low, faintly hoarse bit of feminine laughter in a packed restaurant. All Lily for a heart-stopping instant of wild recognition—and hope.

Always that delirious scrap of hope, as desperate as it was doomed.

He'd once chased a woman halfway across London before he'd realized that she wasn't Lily. That she couldn't have been Lily. His stepsister had died in that terrible crash on the rugged California coast north of San Francisco. And despite the fact that her body had never been recovered from the treacherous waters below that rocky cliff, despite the fact no one had ever found any proof that she'd died in the fire that had burned her car to ash, nothing, not tricks of light or three a.m. conspiracy theories or his own despairing heart playing games with him, could change that.

It had been five years. Lily was gone.

He understood, finally, that they weren't ghosts at all, these flashing glimpses of what might have been. They were his bitter, consuming regret mapped onto a hundred strangers, and none of them the woman he wanted. But this ghost was different.

And the last, Rafael vowed as a deep, black fury surged through him. Five years was long enough to grieve what had never been, thanks to his own selfishness. More than long enough. It was time to move on.

It was a December late afternoon in Charlottesville, Virginia, a picturesque American university town nestled at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, some three hours by car from Washington, DC, and a world away from his native Italy. Rafael had made the trip from the nation's capital by helicopter today, the better to tour the region's vineyards from above with an eye toward expanding the global reach of the Castelli family's historic wine business. As acting CEO—because his ailing father's immense pride did not allow for an official transfer of leadership to Rafael or his younger brother, Luca, while the old man still drew breath, which was as unsurprising as it was irritating—Rafael had taken many such trips in the past few years. Portugal. South Africa. Chile.

This latest trip to the central Virginia wine region was more of the same. The late-afternoon stop in selfconsciously charming Charlottesville en route to a later dinner event with one of the local wine

associations was the typical excursion to help promote the charm of the area. Rafael had expected it and in truth, the bustle of the holiday season made the entire town feel like an interactive Christmas card.

It was not unpleasant, he'd thought as they'd walked the outdoor mall, though he had never much cared for the holiday frenzy. Carolers were strewn along the pedestrianized street, their voices mingling and competing in the crisp air. Shoppers milled in and out of the brightly lit shops beneath festive lights and around clusters of street vendors hawking their wares, and Rafael's small group had ducked inside one of the cafés for strong local coffee to ward off the cold. And to battle any traces of jet lag, no doubt. Rafael had made his order a triple shot of espresso, *per piacere*. And then he'd seen *her*.

The woman moved like poetry against the falling dark, the particular rhythm of her stride chiming deep inside him even though he knew better, drowning out the barrage of Christmas carols assaulting him from the café's overloud sound system.

It had been five years, but Rafael knew that walk in an instant. He knew the swing of those hips and the stretch of those legs. That irresistible roll as she strode past the window where he stood. He caught the flash of her cheek, nothing more.

But that *walk*.

This must stop, he ordered himself coldly. *Lily is dead*.

"Are you all right, Mr. Castelli?" the local wine association host asked worriedly from beside him. His brother, Luca, here in his capacity as global marketing director of Castelli Wine, was too busy on his mobile to do more then frown distractedly in Rafael's direction.

"I will be fine," Rafael gritted out. "Excuse me for a moment."

And he stalked out of the café, pushing his way through the milling holiday crowds and into the waning light.

For a moment, he thought he'd lost her, and he knew that was the best possible outcome of this tired old madness—but then he saw her again, moving on the far side of the mall with that gait that recalled Lily like a shout across the busy street, and that dark current of pure rage sparked in him all over again.

It wasn't Lily. It was never Lily. And yet every time this happened, Rafael raced after the poor stranger who looked a bit too much like his memories and made a goddamned fool of himself.

"This will be the last time you indulge this weakness," he muttered to himself, and then he set out after this latest incarnation of the woman he knew—*he knew*—he'd never see again.

One more time to stamp out the last spark of that nasty little flame of hope that still refused to die. One last time to prove what he already knew: Lily was gone, she was never coming back, and he would never, ever see her equal.

And maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't look for her in all these strangers' faces if he hadn't been such a bastard to her in the first place.

Rafael doubted he'd ever shift the guilt of all he'd done from its usual place, crouched fat and greasy and

bristling with malice in the spot where his soul should have been. But tonight, in this charming little town in a part of America he'd never visited before and likely wouldn't visit again, he would lay what he could of his wretched history to rest.

He didn't expect peace. He didn't deserve it. But he was done chasing phantoms.

She will be a stranger. She is always a stranger. And after you confirm that for the hundredth time, you will never doubt it again.

This had to end. He had to end it.

He couldn't see the face of his quarry, only the fine line of her back and the hint of her willowy form as she walked briskly away from him. She was wrapped up against the December chill in a long black coat and a bright scarf, with only hints of honey-colored hair peeking out from beneath the black knit hat she wore tugged low over her ears. Her hands were thrust deep into her pockets. She was weaving her way through the crowds in a manner that suggested she knew exactly where she was going, and she didn't look back.

And the memories rolled through him like waves against the rocks, crashing over him one after the next. Lily, the only woman who'd ever captured him so completely. Lily, whom he'd lost. Lily, his forbidden lover, his secret and dirty passion, whom he'd hidden from the world and then had to mourn as if she was no more than the daughter of his father's fourth wife. As if she had been nothing more to him than that.

He'd hated himself for so long now it was indistinguishable from that grief that never quite left him. That grief that had transformed him—turning him from a too-rich dilettante who'd been content to throw his family money around rather than make any himself into one of the most formidable businessmen in Italy.

That, too, had taken years. It had been another form of penance.

"Inside you is the seed of a far better man," Lily had said to him the last time he'd seen her, after he'd made her come and then made her cry: his specialty. "I know it. But if you keep going the way you're going, you'll kill it off before it ever has a chance to grow."

"You mistake me for someone who *wants* to grow," Rafael had replied with all that confidently lazy indifference he'd had no idea he'd spend the rest of his life hating himself for feeling. "I don't need to be a bloody garden, Lily. I'm happy as I am."

It was one of the last conversations they'd ever had.

His heart was a hard, almost painful drum inside his chest. His breath came like clouds against the deepening night. He tracked her past this novelty shop, that restaurant and a band of singers in period dress singing "Ave Maria" while he drank in *that walk* as if it was a prayer.

As if this time around, after all these years of regret, he could appreciate that it was the last time he'd ever see it.

He followed her as she left the clamor and bright mess of the downtown mall and started down one of the side streets, marveling at her hauntingly familiar silhouette, that figure he could have drawn in his sleep, the sheer perfection of this woman who *was not* Lily yet looked exactly the way he remembered her.

His Lily, stalking off down a foggy San Francisco street, claiming she wanted nothing more than to get the hell away from him and their twisted relationship at last. Back then he'd laughed, so arrogantly certain she'd come back to him the way she always did. The way she'd been coming back to him since the day they'd first crossed that line when she'd been nineteen.

Another tryst in a hall closet, perhaps, with his hand wrapped over her mouth to muffle her cries as they drove each other crazy only feet away from their families. Another stolen night in her bedroom in her mother's stately home in the moneyed hills of Sausalito, tearing each other apart in the stillness of the northern California night, hands in fists and teeth clenched against the pillows. A hotel room here, a stolen moment in the gardening shed of a summer rental there—all so tawdry, now, in his recollection. All so stupid and wasteful. But then, he'd been so certain there would always be *another*.

His mobile vibrated in his pocket; the assistant he'd left back in that café, he assumed, wondering where in the hell Rafael was. Or perhaps even his brother, Luca, irritated by Rafael's absence when there was work to be done. Either way, he ignored it.

The afternoon was falling fast into evening and Rafael was a different man now than the one he'd been five years ago. He had responsibilities these days; he welcomed them. He couldn't simply chase women across cities the way he had in his youth, though back then, of course, he'd done such things for entirely different reasons. Gluttony, not guilt. He was no longer the inveterate womanizer he'd been then, content to enjoy his questionable relationship with his stepsister in private and all his other and varied conquests in the bright glare of the public eye, never caring if that hurt her.

Never caring about much of anything at all, if he was honest, except keeping himself safe from the claws of emotional entanglements.

This is how it must be, cara, he'd told her with all the offhanded certainty of the shallow, pleasure-seeking fool he'd been then. No one can ever know what happens between us. They wouldn't understand.

He was no longer the selfish and twisted young man who had taken a certain delight in carrying on his shameful affair right under the noses of their blended families, simply because he could. Because Lily could not resist him.

The truth was, he'd been equally unable to resist her. A terrible reality he'd only understood when it was much too late.

He'd changed since those days, ghosts or no ghosts. But he was still Rafael Castelli. And this was the very last time he intended to wallow in his guilt. It was time to grow up, accept that he could not change his past no matter how he wished it could be otherwise and stop imagining he saw a dead woman around every corner.

There was no bringing Lily back. There was only living with himself, with what he'd done, as best he could.

The woman slowed that mesmerizing walk of hers, pulling her hand from her pocket and pointing a key fob at a nearby car. The alarm beeped as she stepped into the street and swung around to open the driver's door, and the light from the street lamp just blooming to life above her caught her full in the face—

And hit him like a battle-ax to the gut.

There was a buzzing in his head, a dizzy, lurching thing that almost cut him in half. She jerked against the car door and left it shut, and he had the dim realization that he'd barked out some kind of order. Or had it been her name? She froze where she stood, staring back at him across the hood of a stout little American wagon that could fit six or seven Italian cars, the frigid sidewalk, the whole of the night.

But there was no mistaking who she was. *Lily*.

It could be no other. Not with those fine, sculpted cheekbones that perfectly framed her wide, carnal mouth that he'd tasted a thousand times. Not with that perfect heart-shaped face that belonged in a painting in the Uffizi. Her eyes were still that dreamy, sleepy blue that reminded him of California winters. Her hair poked out from beneath her knit hat to tumble down over her shoulders, still that rich summer honey, golds and auburns combined. Her brows were the same shade, arched slightly to give her the look of a seventeenth-century Madonna, and she looked as if she had not aged a single day in five years.

He thought his heart might have dropped from his chest. He felt it plummet to the ground. He took a breath, then another, expecting her features to rearrange themselves into a stranger's as he stared. Expecting to jolt awake somewhere to find this all a dream. Expecting *something*—

He dragged in a deep breath, then let it out. Another. And it was still her.

"Lily," he whispered.

Then he was moving. He closed the distance between them in a moment, and there was nothing but noise inside him. A great din, pounding at him and tearing at him and ripping him apart, and his hands shook when he reached to take her by the shoulders. She made a startled sort of sound, but he was drinking her in, looking for signs. For evidence, like that faint freckle to the left of her mouth, to mark that dent in her cheek when she smiled.

And his hands knew the shape of her shoulders even beneath that thick coat, slender yet strong. He had the sense of that easy fit he remembered, his body and hers, as if they'd been fashioned as puzzle pieces that interlocked. He recognized the way her head fell back, the way her lips parted.

"What are you doing?"

He saw her lips form the words, read them from her mouth, but he couldn't make sense of them. He only knew that was her voice—*her voice*—the voice he'd never expected to hear again, faintly husky and indisputably Lily's. It was like a sledgehammer through him, inside him. Wrecking him and remaking him at once.

And the scent of her, that indefinable fragrance that was some combination of hand lotion and moisturizer, shampoo and perfume, all rolled together and mixed with the simple truth of her beneath it all. All Lily. His Lily.

She was alive. Or this was a psychotic break. And Rafael didn't give much of a damn which.

He simply hauled her toward him and took her mouth with his.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dolores Stiger:

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