



Castelli's Virgin Widow (Harlequin Presents)

By Caitlin Crews

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But as Kathryn rises to his challenge, the fire between them that burns with equal parts hatred and lust only grows hotter! Until one night, Luca discovers Kathryn's innocence runs deeper than he could ever have imagined... She belongs to him, and him alone!

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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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"Please tell me this is a bad attempt at levity, Rafael. A practical joke from the least likely clown in Italy."

Luca Castelli made no attempt to temper his harsh tone or the scowl he could feel on his face as he glared across the private library at his older brother. Rafael was also his boss and the head of the family company, a state of affairs that usually did not trouble Luca at all.

But there was nothing *usual* about today.

"I wish that it was," Rafael said from where he sat in an armchair in front of a bright and cheerful fire that did nothing at all to dispel Luca's sense of gloom and fury. "Alas. When it comes to Kathryn, we have no choice."

His brother looked like a monk carved from stone today, his features hewn from granite, which only added to Luca's sense of betrayal and sheer *wrongness*. That was the old Rafael, that heavy, joyless creature made entirely of bitterness and regret. Not the Rafael of the past few years, the one Luca greatly preferred, who had married the love of his life he'd once thought dead and was even now expecting his third child with her.

Luca hated that grief had thrown them all so far back into unpleasant history. Luca hated grief, come to that. No matter its form.

Their father, the infamous Gianni Castelli, who had built an empire of wine and wealth and brusque personality that spanned at least two continents, but was better known around the world for his colorful marital life, was dead.

Outside, January rain lashed the windows of the old Castelli manor house that sprawled with such insouciance at the top of an alpine lake in Northern Italy's Dolomite Mountains, as it had done for generations. The heavy clouds were low over the water, concealing the rest of the world from view, as if to pay tribute to the old man as he'd been interred in the Castelli mausoleum earlier this morning.

Ashes rendered ashes and dust forever dust.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

Rafael, who had been acting CEO of the family business for years now despite Gianni's blustery refusal to formally step aside, was now indisputably in charge. That meant Luca was the newly minted chief operating officer, a title that did not come close to describing his pantheon of responsibilities as co-owner but was useful all the same. Luca had initially thought these finicky bits of official business were a good thing for the Castelli brothers as well as the company, not to mention long overdue, given they'd both been acting in those roles ever since the start of their father's decline in health some years back.

Until now.

"I fail to understand why we cannot simply pay the damned woman off like all the rest of the horde of ex-wives," Luca said, aware that his tone was clipped and bordering on unduly aggressive. He felt restless and edgy in his position on the low couch opposite Rafael, but he knew if he moved, it would end badly. A fist through a wall. An upended bookshelf. A broken pane of glass. All highly charged reactions he did not care to explore, much less explain to his brother—given they smacked of a loss of control, which Luca did not allow. Ever. "Settle some of Father's fortune on her, send her on her way and be done with it."

"Father's will is very clear in regard to Kathryn," Rafael replied, and he sounded no happier about it than Luca felt. Luca told himself that was something anyway. "And she is his widow, Luca. Not his ex-wife. A crucial distinction."

Luca nearly growled but checked it at the last moment. "That's nothing but semantics."

"Sadly not." Rafael shook his head, but his gaze never left Luca's. "The choice is hers. She can either accept a lump settlement now, or a position in the company. She chose the latter."

"This is ridiculous."

It was something far worse than merely ridiculous, but Luca didn't have a word to describe that gnawing, hollow thing inside him that always yawned open at any mention of his father's sixth and final wife. *Kathryn*.

The one who was even now in the larger, more formal library downstairs, crying what appeared to be real tears over the death of a husband three times her age she could only have married for the most cynical of reasons. Luca had seen them trickle silently down her cheeks, one after the next, as they'd all stood about in the frigid air earlier, giving the impression she could not manage to contain her grief.

He didn't believe it. Not for a second.

If Luca knew anything, it was this: the kind of love that might lead to such grieving was rare, exceedingly unlikely and had never made a great many appearances in the Castelli family. He thought Rafael's current happiness was perhaps the only evidence of it in generations.

"For all we know, Father found her hawking her wares on the streets of London," he muttered now. Then glared at his brother. "What the hell will I do with her in the office? Do we even know if she can read?"

Rafael shifted, the dark eyes that were so much like Luca's own narrow and shrewd. "You will find something to keep her busy, because the will assures her three years of employment. Ample time to introduce her to the joys of the written word, I'd think. And whether you like her or not is irrelevant."

Like was not at all the word Luca would have used to describe what happened inside him at the mention of that woman. It wasn't even close.

"I have no feelings about her whatsoever." Luca let out a laugh that sounded hollow to his own ears. "What is one more child bride—acquired solely to cater to the old man's ego—to me?"

His brother only gazed at him for a moment that seemed to stretch on for far too long. The old windows rattled. The fire crackled and spat. And Luca found he had no desire whatsoever to hear whatever his older

brother might say next. He'd preferred Rafael when he'd been lost in a prison of fury and regret, he told himself, and unable to concentrate on anything outside his own pain. At least then he'd been a known quantity. This new Rafael was entirely too insightful.

"If you are determined to do this," he said before Rafael could open his mouth and say things Luca would have to fend off, "why not set her up with something in Sonoma? She can get a hands-on experience at the vineyards in California, just as we did when we were boys. It can be a delightful holiday for her, far, far away."

From me, he did not say. Far, far away from me.

Rafael shrugged. "She chose Rome."

Rome. Luca's city. Luca's side of their highly competitive wine business. The marketing power and global reach of the Castelli Wine brand were, he flattered himself, all his doing—and possible in large part because he'd been left to his own devices for years. He had certainly not been required to play babysitter for one of his father's legion of mistakes.

His father's very worst mistake, to his way of thinking. In a lifetime of so very many—including Luca himself, he'd long thought. He knew his father would have agreed.

"There's no room," he said now. "The team is lean, focused and entirely handpicked. There's no place for a bit of fluff on sabbatical from her true vocation as an old man's trophy."

Rafael was his boss then, he could see. Not his brother.

And entirely pitiless. "You'll have to make room."

Luca shook his head. "It may set us back months, if not years, and cause incalculable damage in the process as we try to arrange the team around such a creature and what are sure to be her many, many mistakes."

"I trust you'll ensure that none of that happens," Rafael said drily. "Or do you doubt your own abilities?"

"This sort of vulgar nepotism will likely cause a riot—"

"Luca." Rafael's voice was not loud, but it silenced Luca all the same. "Your objections are noted. But you are not seeing the big picture."

Luca tried to contain the seething thing within that pushed out from the darkest part of him and threatened to take him over. He thrust his legs out in front of him and raked a hand through his hair as if he was languid. Indolent. Unbothered by all of this, despite his arguments.

The role he'd been playing all his life. He had no idea why it had become so difficult these past couple of years to maintain his profoundly unconcerned facade. Why it had started to feel as if it was more of a cage than a retreat.

"Enlighten me," he said, mildly enough, when he was certain he could manage to speak in his usual half bored, half amused tone.

Rafael did not look fooled. But he only picked up his glass from the antique side table and swirled the amber liquid within.

"Kathryn has captured the public's interest," he said after a moment. "I shouldn't have to remind you of that. *Saint Kate* has been on every cover of every tabloid since the news of Father's death broke. Her grief. Her selflessness. Her true love for the old man against all odds. Et cetera."

"You will excuse me if I am skeptical about the truth of her devotion." At least he sounded far more amused than he felt. "To put it mildly. The truth of her interest in his bank account I find a far more convincing tale, if less entertaining."

"The truth is malleable and has little to do with the story that ends up splashed across every gossip site and magazine in existence," Rafael said, and there was the hint of a rueful smile on his face when he looked at Luca again. "No one knows this better than me. Can we really complain if this time the coverage is not exactly in our favor?"

Luca wasn't sure he found his latest stepmother's obvious manipulation of the press to be in the same realm as the stories Rafael and his wife, Lily—who also happened to be their former stepsister, because the Castelli family tree was nothing if not tangled and bent back on itself—had told to explain the fact she'd been thought dead for five years.

But he thought better of saying anything.

After a moment, Rafael continued, "The reality is this. Even though you and I have been running things for years now, the perception from the outside is very different. Father's death gives anyone and everyone the opportunity to make grand claims about how his upstart, ungrateful sons will ruin what he built. If we are seen to shun Kathryn, to treat her badly, that can only reflect negatively on us and add fuel to that fire." He set his glass down without drinking from it. "I want no fuel, no fire. Nothing the tabloids can sink their dirty little claws into. You understand. This is necessary."

What Luca understood was that this was a directive. From the chief executive officer of Castelli Wine and the new official head of his family to one among his many underlings. The fact that Luca owned half of the company did not change the fact he answered to Rafael. And that none of this sat well with him didn't alter the fact that Rafael wasn't asking his opinion on the matter.

He was delivering an order.

Luca stood abruptly, before he said things he wasn't sure he meant in an effort to sway his brother's opinion. Rafael stayed where he was.

"I don't like this," Luca said quietly. "It can't end well."

"It must end well," Rafael countered. "That's the whole point."

"I'll remind you that this was entirely your idea when it becomes a vast and unconquerable disaster, sinking the whole of Castelli Wine in the wake of this woman's incompetence," Luca said, and started for the door. He needed to *do* something. Run for miles and miles. Swim even farther. Lift very heavy weights or find a willing and eager woman. Anything but stay here and brood about this terrible new reality. "We can discuss it as we plummet to the bottom of the sea. In pieces."

Rafael laughed.

"Kathryn is not our Titanic, Luca," he said, and there was a note Luca did not like at all in his voice. Rafael tilted his head slightly to one side. "But perhaps you think she's yours?"

What Luca thought was that he could do without his brother's observations today—and on any day, should those observations involve Kathryn, who was without doubt the bane of his existence.

Damn that woman. And damn his father for foisting her upon his sons in the first place.

He left Rafael behind in the private library with a rude hand gesture that made his brother laugh, and headed downstairs through the grand old hallways of the ancient house that he hardly noticed the details of anymore. The portraits cluttering the walls. The statuary by this or that notable Italian artist flung about on every flat surface. It was all the same as it had been before Luca had been born, and the same as it would be when Rafael's eldest son, Arlo, was a grandfather. Castellis endured, no matter the messes they made.

He imagined that meant he would, too, despite this situation.

Somehow.

He heard Lily's voice as he passed one of the reception rooms and glanced in, seeing his pregnant sister-in-law, some six months along, having one of her "discussions" with eight-year-old Arlo and two-year-old Renzo about appropriate behavior. Luca hid a grin as he passed, thinking the lecture sounded very similar to ones he'd received in the very same place when he'd been a child. Not from his mother, who had abdicated that position as quickly as possible following Luca's birth, or from his father, who had been far too important to trouble himself with domestic arrangements or child rearing. He'd been raised by a parade of well-meaning staff and a series of stepmothers with infinitely more complicated motives.

Perhaps that was where he'd learned his lifelong aversion to complications.

And to stepmothers, for that matter.

Luca had grown up in the midst of a very messy family who'd broadcasted their assorted private dramas for all the world to see, no matter if the relentless publicity had made it all that much worse. He'd hated it. He preferred things clean and easy. Orderly. No fusses. No melodrama. No theatrics that ended up splashed across the papers, the way everything always did in the Castelli family, and were then presented in the most hideous light imaginable. He didn't mind that he was seen as one of the world's foremost playboys—hell, he'd cultivated that role so no one would ever take him seriously, an asset in business as well as in his personal life. He didn't break hearts—he simply didn't traffic in the kind of emotional upheavals that had marked every other member of his family, again and again and again. *No, thank you.*

But Kathryn was a different story, he thought as he made his way to the grand library on the ground floor and saw the slight figure standing all alone in the farthest corner, staring out at the rain and the fog as if she was competing with it for the title of Most Desolate. Kathryn was more than a mess.

Kathryn was a disaster.

He wasn't the least bit surprised that *Saint Kate*, as she'd been dubbed around the world for her supposed martyrdom to the cause that was old Gianni Castelli and his considerable fortune, was all over the papers this

week. Kathryn did *convincingly innocent* and *easily wounded* so well that Luca had always thought she'd have been much better off dedicating her life to the stage.

Though he supposed she had, really. Playing the understanding mistress and undemanding trophy wife to a man so much older than her twenty-five years was a performance all its own. What Luca couldn't understand was why an obvious trollop like Kathryn made his skin feel too tight against his frame and his hands itch to test the smoothness of hers, even now. It didn't make any sense, this stretched-taut, heavy *thing* in him that nothing—not time, not space, not the odious fact of her marriage to his own father, not even the prospect of her polluting the refuge of his office in Rome—ever eased or altered in any way.

Users Review

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