



Caroselli's Christmas Baby (The Caroselli Inheritance Book 1)

By Michelle Celmer

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Having a baby with his best friend is the means to an end for Nick Caroselli. In his quest to receive a ten-million-dollar inheritance, he'll also be giving Theresa Phillips the one thing she really wants...a child. Once the baby's born and the money's in the bank, they can divorce, share custody and go back to being buddies. But their best-laid plans are about to take a sharp turn under the mistletoe, as things really heat up this Christmas.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

USA Today Bestseller Michelle Celmer is the author of more than 25 books for Harlequin and Silhouette. You can usually find her in her office with her laptop loving the fact that she gets to work in her pajamas. Write her at: PO BOX 300, Clawson, MI 48017, visit her website at: www.michellecelmer.com or find her on Facebook at: Michelle Celmer Author

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Late again.

Terri Phillips watched with a mix of irritation and amusement as her best friend, Nick Caroselli, walked briskly through the dining room of the bistro to their favorite booth near the bar, where they met every Thursday night for dinner.

With his jet-black hair, smoldering brown eyes, warm olive complexion and lean physique, heads swiveled and forks halted halfway to mouths as he passed. But Nick being Nick, he didn't seem to notice. Not that he was unaware of his effect on women, nor was he innocent of using his charm to get his way when the need arose.

Not that it worked on her anymore.

"Sorry I'm late," he said with that crooked grin he flashed when he was trying to get out of trouble. Fat snowflakes peppered the shoulders of his wool coat and dotted his hair, and his cheeks were rosy from the cold, meaning he'd walked the two blocks from the world headquarters of Caroselli Chocolate. "Work was crazy today."

"I've only been here a few minutes," she said, even though it had actually been more like twenty. Long enough to have downed two glasses of the champagne they were supposed to be toasting with.

He leaned in to brush a kiss across her cheek, the rasp of his evening stubble rough against her skin. She breathed in the whisper of his sandalwood soap—a birthday gift from her—combined with the sweet scent of chocolate that clung to him every time he spent the day in the company test kitchen.

"Still snowing?" she asked.

"It's practically a blizzard out there." Nick shrugged out of his coat, then stuck his scarf and leather gloves in the sleeve—a habit he'd developed when they were kids, after misplacing endless sets of mittens and scarves—then hung it on the hook behind their booth. "At this rate, we may actually get a white Christmas this year."

"That would be nice." Having spent the first nine years of her life in New Mexico, she'd never even seen snow until she'd moved to Chicago. To this day, she still loved it. Of course, having a home business meant no snowy commute, so she was biased.

"I ordered our usual," she said as Nick slid into his seat.

He loosened his tie, and gestured to the champagne bottle. "Are we celebrating something?"

"You could say that."

He plucked his napkin from the table and draped it across his lap. "What's up?"

"First," she said, "you'll be happy to know that I broke up with Blake."

Nick beamed. "Well, damn, that is a reason to celebrate!"

Nick had never liked her most recent boyfriend—the latest in a long and depressing string of failed relationships. He didn't think Blake had what it took to make Terri happy. Turned out he was right. Even if it did take her four months to see it.

But last week Blake had mentioned offhandedly that his lease was almost up, and it seemed silly that they should both be paying rent when he spent most of his time at her place, anyway. Despite being more than ready to get married and start a family, when she imagined doing it with him, she'd felt...well, not much of anything, actually. Which was definitely not a good way to feel about a potential husband and father of her children. It was proof that, as Nick had warned her, she was settling again.

Nick poured himself a glass of champagne and took a sip. "So, what did he say when you dumped him?"

"That I'll never find anyone else like him."

Nick laughed. "Well, yeah, isn't that the point? He was about as interesting as a paper clip. With half the personality."

She wouldn't deny that he'd been a little, well...bland. His idea of a good time was sitting at the computer, with its twenty-seven-inch high-def monitor, for hours on end playing *World of Warcraft* while she watched television or read. The truth is, he would probably miss her computer more than her.

"He's an okay guy. He just isn't the guy for me," she told Nick. One day he would meet the game addict of his dreams and they would live a long happy life in cyberspace together.

Their waitress appeared to deliver their meal. A double pepperoni deep-dish pizza and cheesy bread. When she was gone, Nick said, "He's out there, you know. The one for you. You'll find him."

She used to think so, too. But here she was almost thirty with not a single prospect anywhere in her near future. Her life plan had her married with a couple kids already. Which is why she had decided to take matters into her own hands.

"There's something else we're celebrating," she told Nick. "I'm going to have a baby."

He bolted upright and set down his glass so hard she was surprised it didn't shatter against the tiled tabletop.

"What? When? Is it Blake's?"

"God, no!" She could just imagine that. The kid would probably be born with a game remote fused to its hands.

Nick leaned forward and hissed under his breath, "Whoever it is, he damn well better be planning to do right by you and the baby."

Always looking out for her, she thought with a shot of affection so intense it burned. When he wasn't getting her into trouble, that is. Although it was usually the other way around. It was typically her making rash decisions, and Nick talking sense into her. This time was different. This time she knew exactly what she was doing.

"There is no *who*," she told him, dishing them each out a slice of pizza. "I'm not actually pregnant. Yet."

Nick frowned. "Then why did you say you're having a baby?"

"Because I will be, hopefully within the next year. I'm going to be a single mom."

He sat back in his seat, looking stunned. "How? I mean, who's going to be the father?"

"I'm going to use a donor."

"A *donor*?" His dark brows pulled together. "You're not serious."

She shoved down the deep sting of disappointment. She had hoped he would understand, that he would be happy for her. Clearly, he wasn't. "Completely serious. I'm ready. I'm financially sound, and since I work at home, I won't have to put the baby in day care. The timing is perfect."

"Wouldn't it be better if you were married?"

"I've pretty much struck out finding Mr. Right. I always said that I wanted to have my first baby by the time I'm thirty, and I'm almost there. And you know that I've always wanted a family of my own. Since my aunt died, I've got no one."

"You've got me," he said, his expression so earnest her heart melted.

Yes, she had him, not to mention his entire crazy family, but it wasn't the same. When the chips were down, she was still an outsider.

"This doesn't mean we aren't going to be friends still," she said. "In fact, I'll probably need you more than ever. You'll be the baby's only other family. Uncle Nicky."

The sentiment did nothing to erase the disenchantment from his expression. He pushed away his plate, as if he'd suddenly lost his appetite, and said, "You deserve better than a sperm donor."

"I don't exactly have the best luck with men."

"But what about the baby?" Nick said, sounding testier by the second. "Doesn't it deserve to have two parents?"

"As you well know, having two parents doesn't necessarily make for a happy childhood."

His deepening frown said that he knew she was right. Though he didn't like to admit it, his childhood had left deep, indelible scars.

"I was hoping you would understand," she said, and for some stupid reason she felt like crying. And she hardly *ever* cried. At least, not in front of other people. All it had ever earned her from her aunt—who didn't have a sympathetic bone in her body—was a firm lecture.

"I do," Nick said, reaching across the table for her hand. "I just want you to be happy."

"This *will* make me happy."

He smiled and gave her hand a squeeze. "Then I'm happy, too."

She hoped he really meant that. That he wasn't just humoring her. But as they ate their pizza and chatted, Nick seemed distracted, and she began to wonder if telling him about having a baby had been a bad idea, although for the life of her she wasn't sure why it would matter either way to him.

After they finished eating, they put on their coats and were walking to the door when Nick asked, "Did you drive or take the bus?"

"Bus," she said. If she thought she might be drinking, she always opted for public transportation. If the man who had plowed into her father's car had only been as responsible, she wouldn't be an orphan.

"Walk back to the office with me and I'll drive you home."

"Okay."

The snow had stopped, but a prematurely cold wind whipped her hair around her face and the pavement was slippery, which made the two-block hike tricky. It was how she rationalized the fact that he was unusually quiet and there was a deep furrow in his brow.

When they got to the Caroselli Chocolate world headquarters building, it was closed for the night, so Nick used a key card to let them in. With a retail store taking up most of the ground floor, the lobby smelled of the chocolate confections lining the shelves. Everything from standard chocolate bars to gourmet chocolate-covered apples.

Nick felt around in his pockets, then cursed under his breath. "I left my car keys in my office."

"You want me to wait down here?"

"No, you can come up." Then he grinned and said, "Unless you're an industrial spy trying to steal the Caroselli secret recipe."

"Right, because we both know what an accomplished cook I am." If there were a way to burn water, she would figure it out. Meaning she ordered out a lot, and the rest of the time ate microwave dinners.

They walked past the receptionist...

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