



Caroselli's Accidental Heir (Harlequin DesireThe Caroselli Inheritance)

By Michelle Celmer

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When Lucy Bates caught herself falling too hard for Chicago businessman Tony Caroselli, she ran. How could she measure up to his wealthy family's standards? But now she's pregnant and back to tell the truth...only to see Tony marrying another woman before her very eyes!

Lucy always had impeccable timing—especially interrupting a wedding Tony never wanted. And if she produces a male heir, Tony stands to inherit a fortune. Plus, the real payoff is having Lucy back where she belongs—with him. But when she finds out about his inheritance, will she feel like a pawn and run again?

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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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In twenty-three years, nine months and sixteen days, Lucy Bates had made her fair share of questionable choices. Due to her impulsive nature, her guileless curiosity-and an occasional lack of basic common sense-she'd found herself in more than a *few...complicated* situations. But her current predicament topped them all.

Note to self: The next time you have the bright idea to leave a man and move across country in the hopes that he 'll follow you, don't bother.

Not only had Tony not followed her, he'd gone out and found someone new. After nearly a year of casually dating Lucy, and not a single mention of taking their relationship to the next level, he was marrying a virtual stranger.

Not only had he been dating this new woman a measly two months, *she* wasn't pregnant with his baby. Lucy was.

She was a stereotype.

The poor girl who fell for the rich guy and got knocked up. And though there was a whole lot more to it than that, she knew that was all anyone would see. Including Tony.

"This is it," the cab driver announced as he pulled up to the house. Lucy peered out the window. Located in one of the oldest and most prestigious neighborhoods in Chicago, the Caroselli mansion put the neighboring homes to shame. It was old, and a little gaudy for her taste. But very grand.

The street was lined with luxury cars and SUVs, and children were playing in the park directly across the street. Tony once told her that his grandfather, the founder of Caroselli chocolate, liked to sit in his study, in his favorite chair, and watch the kids play. He said it reminded him of home. Home being Italy.

She handed the driver the last of her cash and climbed out of the cab. The sun was shining, but there was a chill in the air.

She'd blown her entire savings account on a roundtrip plane ticket from Florida to Chicago, paying the exorbitant Sunday rates, so from here on in she would have to rely on her credit card. If she maxed that out...well, she would think of something. She always did.

But it wasn't just about her anymore. She needed to start thinking like a mother, putting the baby first.

She laid a hand on her swollen belly, felt the thump thump of itty bitty feet against her palm, never so

confused, or terrified, or content in her whole life.

She promised herself right then that if she could just figure this mess out, she would never do another impulsive thing for as long as she lived.

And this time she meant it.

"You've got him right where you want him," her mom had told her on the way to the airport that morning in her clunker of a car that always seemed to be one repair away from the junkyard. "Whatever he offers you to keep this quiet, you ask for double."

And that was her mom in a nutshell.

"I'm not looking for hush money," Lucy said. "I don't want anything from him. I just think he should know about the baby before he gets married."

"That's what the phone is for."

"I need to do this face-to-face." She owed him that much after the way she'd behaved. He didn't want Lucy, that much was obvious, but this was his baby, too. She had no right to keep this from him.

"By crashing his engagement party?"

"I am not crashing anything. I'm going to talk to him before the party."

What she hadn't counted on was her flight being two hours late, which gave her only about two hours to get to Tony then get back to the airport for her return flight. Now she had no choice but to talk to him at the party. But she had no intention of making a scene. With any luck, people would just assume that she was another guest. A friend of the bride perhaps.

All she needed was five minutes of his time, and then they could both get on with their lives. If he wanted to be a part of the baby's life, that would be wonderful. If he tossed a dollar or two her way every so often to help with expenses, she would be eternally grateful. If he didn't, if he wanted nothing to do with her and the baby, she would be disappointed, but she would understand. After all, hadn't she been the one to insist that they keep it casual? No obligations, no expectations. How could she then turn around and expect him to take responsibility for a child he never wanted?

Nope, nothing suspicious about that.

"Even if he wasn't engaged, baby or no baby, that man would never marry you," her mom had told her. "Men like that only keep women like us around for one reason."

A fact she loved to remind Lucy of every chance she got. And she was right. Lucy had told herself a million times that Tony was too good for her, that even if he did want to settle down someday, it would be with someone from his own side of the street. And that's exactly what he'd done.

She and Tony were from two very different worlds, and she had been a fool to ever believe that he would follow her to Florida and beg her to come back, to hope that he would miss her. All she could do now was try to pick up the pieces of the mess she had created. Which meant shelving her pride and accepting his financial

help if he offered it.

Well, she thought, the mansion looming ahead of her, *it's now or never*.

Heart in her throat, and before she lost her nerve, Lucy rushed up to the front porch and knocked on the door. Her knees felt squishy and her heart was pounding, but after a minute or so no one answered, so she knocked again.

She waited, but still no answer.

She was already off to a rip-roaring start. Could the individual who sent her the email have been wrong about the date of the party? Or the time? Or even the location?

And what woman in her right mind would take the word of a typed letter from an anonymous "friend"?

This one would. And it was too late to turn back now.

She tried the knob and found it unlocked. Why not add breaking and entering to her list of transgressions?

She eased the front door open, peering inside. There was no one in sight, so she stepped in, snapping the door quietly closed behind her. The foyer and adjacent living room were elegantly decorated and showplace-perfect. And too quiet. Where the heck was everyone? Maybe it really was the wrong day, and the cars outside were for another house, and a different party.

She was about to turn around and slip back out the door when she heard faint music from the rear of the house. String instruments. Maybe a quartet? She couldn't make out the melody.

Thinking she might actually have a chance to slip into the party unnoticed, she followed the sound of the music, passing a spectacular dining room decorated in deep hues of red and gold with a table long enough to accommodate a small army.

The music stopped abruptly and she turned. Across from the dining room was an enormous family room with a stone fireplace that kissed the peak of a cathedral ceiling. Rows of chairs lined either side of a silk runner....

Oh. My. God.

This was no engagement party. It was a wedding!

What struck her immediately was the normalcy of it all. The tradition. The handful of wedding guests perched on satin-covered folding chairs. The bride with her long, elegant neck and blade-like cheekbones. Her dress, an off-white shift, was as simple as it was stylish, while showing off a pair of legs so slender and long, they brought her nearly to eye level with Tony, who at six feet two inches was in no way lacking height.

Speaking of Tony.

Lucy's heart lifted the instant she laid eyes on him, then slammed to the pit of her stomach. In a tailored suit, his jet-black hair combed back off his forehead, he looked as if he'd stepped off the cover of *GQ*, but in a

mussed, I'm-too-sexy-for-my-shirt way. Very much the way he looked the first time she saw him in the bar where she'd worked. And until that very second she hadn't realized just how much she had missed him. How much she needed him. Until he came along last year, she never *needed* anyone.

So what now? Should she slide into one of the empty seats and pretend to belong there, then talk to him after the service? Or should she turn and run back out the door and phone him later, as her mom had suggested.

"Lucy?" Tony said.

She blinked out of her stupor and realized Tony was looking right back at her. And so was the bride. In fact, everyone in the room had turned and all eyes were fixed on her.

Oh, boy.

She stood there frozen, wondering what she should do. She'd come here to *talk* to Tony, not crash his wedding mid-ceremony. But she was already here, and the wedding was already disrupted, and running and hiding wasn't an option. Why not do what she came to do?

"I am so sorry," she said, as if an apology would mean diddly-squat at this point. After this, if he ever spoke to her again, it would be a miracle. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Yet here you are," Tony said, his tone flat. He once had told her that he admired her spunk, and the fact that she had the courage to speak her mind, to stand up for what she believed in, but she doubted this was what he'd had in mind. "What do you want?"

"I need to speak to you," Lucy said. "Privately."

"Now? If you hadn't noticed, I'm getting married."

Oh, she noticed.

The bride looked back and forth between the two of them, her face pale, as if she might faint. Or maybe she always looked that way. Come to think of it, she bore an uncanny resemblance to Morticia Adams. "Tony? Who is this?" she asked, her brow wrinkled in distaste as she looked down her nose at Lucy.

"No one of any consequence," he said, and did that ever sting. On the bright side, he would be eating those words very soon. Though that would hardly help to improve her situation.

"It's important," she told him.

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say right here," Tony told Lucy. "In front of my family." Not a good idea. "Tony--"

"Right here," he insisted, pointing to the floor to make his point.

She recognized that rigid stance, the look of unwavering resolve. He wasn't going to back down.

If that was really what he wanted...

Head held high, shoulders squared, she unzipped her jacket, exposing the basketball-sized bump under her snug-fitting T-shirt, cringing inwardly as a collective gasp cut through the silence, reverberating off the velvet-covered walls. She would never be able to forget that sound, or the look on everyone's faces for the rest of her life. If Tony had been aiming to embarrass Lucy or humiliate her, it had backfired. The bride was the one who looked mortified.

"Is it yours?" she asked Tony, and he looked to Lucy questioningly. She shot him a look that said, *What do you think?*

He turned back to his fiancée and said, "Alice, I'm sorry, but I need a minute with my...with Lucy."

"I suspect it will take considerably longer than a minute," Alice said, her voice tight. She slipped the diamond engagement ring from a long, slender, claw-like finger and held it out to him. "And something tells me that I won't be needing this any longer."

"Alice-

She stopped him. "When I agreed to marry you, a pregnant lover wasn't part of the deal. Let's just cut our losses, shall we? Keep it dignified."

Was that all their marriage was to Alice? A deal? She looked humiliated, and seriously annoyed, but heartbroken? Not so much. And maybe her fingers weren't so clawlike, Lucy thought as she watched Alice fiddling with the ring. Good thing, too, because she looked as if she'd like to gouge out Lucy's eyes.

Tony didn't try to change her mind. He obviously knew a lost cause when he saw one. Or maybe he didn't love her as much as he thought. Lucy couldn't help feeling that she had just done him a favor, though she doubted he would see it that way. He would probably never forgive her.

Alice tried to hand the ring to him, but he shook his head.

"Keep it," he said. "Think of it as my way of saying I'm sorry."

Considering the size of the rock, that had to be at least a five-figure apology. As consolation prizes went, Alice could have done a lot worse.

Alice palmed the ring, accepting her defeat with the utmost grace, and Lucy actually felt sorry for her. "I'll go get my things."

A woman in the front row whom Lucy recognized from pictures as Tony's mom, shot to her feet. Which, even in three-inch heels barely brought her to shoulder height with her ex-future-daughter-in-law.

"Alice, let me help you," she said, slipping an arm around hers and leading her from the room, shooting Lucy a look that said, *Just wait until I get my hands on you.* Despite being in her sixties, and no larger than Lucy sans the baby weight, of course-if she was anything like her son she would be a formidable adversary. And after what Lucy had done today, she couldn't imagine they would ever be anything but enemies.

One more stupid act to regret. Her relationship with her child's grandmother forever scarred before it even began. In Lucy's world this sort of thing happened all the time, but the Carosellis were cultured and sophisticated, and she knew now, way out of her league. How could she have ever believed that she and

Tony could have a future together? Her mom was right. Men like him didn't marry women like her.

The instant Alice was out of sight the silence dissolved into whispers and murmurs. Lucy couldn't hear what any one person was saying, but she had a pretty good imagination.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

A man she recognized as Tony's father stepped over to speak to him, taking Tony by the arm. Physically, two men couldn't have looked more different. Tony was long and lean and fit, while his dad was shorter and stocky. Other than their noses-which most of the Caroselli family seemed to share-they didn't look a thing alike.

After a few brief, but sharply spoken words, the elder Caroselli left in the direction his wife had gone, but not before he shot Lucy a look that seemed to say, *I'll deal with you later.*

Lucy felt so horrible already, nothing he could say or do could make matters worse than they already were.

Tony walked over to where she stood, his expression unreadable. But he looked so good her heart ached. She longed to wrap her arms around him and hold on for dear life.

You can't have him.

There was a point early in the relationship when his emotional unavailability had been his most appealing quality. She had stupidly believed that because she had never let herself fall in love, she was immune to the experience. And by the time she had figured out what was happening to her, it was too late. She loved him.

But on the very slim chance that he planned to pull her into his arms and profess his undying love for her, now would be the time.

He curled his fingers around her arm instead, and said in a tight voice, "Let's go."

She hesitated. "Go where?"

"Anywhere but here," he mumbled, glancing over at the guests who were now huddled in small groups and watching the action with brazen curiosity. Hadn't he told her a million times how nosy his family were, how he wished everyone would mind their own business? Could she have picked a worse place to do this?

Tony's grip was so firm, all Lucy could do was try to keep up with his much longer stride as he half walked/half dragged her to his car out front. But he was touching her, so she didn't even care. How pathetic was that?

He opened the passenger door for her, then he got in the driver's seat, but instead of starting the engine, he just sat there. She waited for the explosion. For Tony to accuse her of ruining his life. Then out of the blue, for no reason at all, he started to laugh.

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